

Solo Leveling

IV



Chugong



Solo Leveling

IV

CHUGONG



YEN
UN
NEW YORK

Copyright

Solo Leveling IV

CHUGONG

Translation by Hye Young Im and J. Torres This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SOLO LEVELING Volume 4

© Chugong 2017 / D&C MEDIA

All rights reserved.

First published in Korea in 2017 by D&C MEDIA Co., Ltd.

English translation © 2022 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com  facebook.com/yenpress  twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com  instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: April 2022

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Chugong, author. | Im, Hye Young, translator. | Torres, J., 1969– translator.

Title: Solo leveling / Chugong ; translation by Hye Young Im and J. Torres.

Other titles: Na honjaman rebereop. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020047938 | ISBN 9781975319274 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319298 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319311 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319335 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PL994.215.G66 N313 2021 | DDC 895.73/5—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020047938>

ISBNs: 978-1-97531933-5 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1934-2 (ebook)

E3-20220311-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1. The True Reward](#)

[2. The Korea-Japan Alliance](#)

[3. Ryuji Goto](#)

[4. An Ominous Presence](#)

[5. King of the Ants](#)

[6. A Fruitful Harvest](#)

[7. All Eyes on Jinwoo](#)

[8. An Unexpected Proposal](#)

[9. The Applicant](#)

[10. How About SoloPlay Guild?](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



1

THE TRUE REWARD



1

THE TRUE REWARD

“Whew...”

Jinwoo breathed a small sigh of relief. This moment signaled the end of his long journey of clearing the hundred floors of the Demon’s Castle. As he closed his eyes to process the powerful wave of emotions that flooded over him, his mother’s face popped into his head.

.....

When Jinwoo opened his eyes again, he saw the system messages still in front of him. Incredibly, there were four level-up notifications.

Four levels at once?

His face lit up. It was an unbelievable triumph, considering how his leveling speed had significantly slowed after reaching level 90. He checked the stat window right away.

[Level: 97]

He had indeed gone up four levels.

Nice!

Jinwoo pumped his fist. The feeling of relief over having cleared the dungeon was overlaid by a sense of achievement, but he decided to save the celebrating for later.

There was something more important.

Purified Blood of the Demon Monarch.

It was the last ingredient he needed to make the Elixir of Life. Jinwoo

unwrapped the bandages from his hand and reached toward the light sparkling from the corpse of Balan, the Demon Monarch.

[You have discovered Item: Demon Monarch's Ring. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Item: Demon Monarch's Sword. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered 2 Items: Demon Monarch's Daggers. Would you like to acquire them?]

[You have discovered 2 Items: Balan's Horns. Would you like to acquire them?]

[You have discovered Material Item: Purified Blood of the Demon Monarch. Would you like to acquire it?]

Jinwoo was more anxious than elated as the notifications for items other than the one he wanted popped up one after another. He shouted for joy when the notification for the Purified Blood of the Demon Monarch finally appeared.

There it is!

Jinwoo acquired all the items and then called the Purified Blood of the Demon Monarch to his hand.

[MATERIAL ITEM: PURIFIED BLOOD OF THE DEMON MONARCH]

Acquisition Difficulty: ??

Category: Material

This liquid was made by purifying the blood of Demon Monarch Balan.

It possesses powerful magic but still contains traces of poison even after purification, so the materials World Tree Fragment and Spring Water from Echo Forest are required in order to neutralize the poison and use it as medicine.

The red liquid sloshed around as Jinwoo held the clear glass bottle containing it at an angle.

This is the blood of the Demon Monarch.....

He already had the World Tree Fragment and Spring Water from Echo Forest, so why wait?

Jinwoo called up the Craft window.

[CRAFT]

Consumable: Elixir of Life (3/3)

Unlike the last time he'd checked, *Elixir of Life* was now flashing on the screen. As Jinwoo skimmed the contents, the word *Craftable* caught his eye.

[ELIXIR OF LIFE]

—Craftable

—Materials

Purified Blood of the Demon Monarch (1/1)

World Tree Fragment (1/1)

Spring Water from Echo Forest (1/1)

[Would you like to craft Item: Elixir of Life?]

In his impatience to see the result, Jinwoo didn't hesitate.

"Craft."

[Crafting Item: Elixir of Life.]

[10, 9, 8...]

He held his breath.

[7, 6, 5...]

[The rate of success and item quantity will vary based on the crafter's intelligence level.]

Jinwoo stared, incredulous.

Does that really say the rate of success and item quantity depends on my intelligence level?

Did that mean he wouldn't be able to craft this at all if he was stupid? Jinwoo found himself nodding as the logic behind it strangely made sense.

The countdown continued.

[4, 3, 2...]

Why did the words *rate of success* bother Jinwoo so much? His only comfort was that he'd invested every single ability point in the intelligence stat after belatedly realizing its importance.

[1, 0.]

[Crafting is complete!]

[Crafting was successful!]

[You have acquired 6 Items: Elixirs of Life!]

"Yes!" Jinwoo threw both arms in the air as soon as he saw that it had worked.

Huh?

But then he noticed something strange—the bottle with the Demon Monarch's blood was still in his right hand.

The amount of blood did decrease a little bit, but...

He tried pulling the World Tree Fragment and Spring Water from Echo Forest out of his inventory. However, all that appeared on the ground before him was the World Tree Fragment, which seemed to have a chunk missing.

He opened and thoroughly scoured his inventory, but no Spring Water was to be found.

Hmm, maybe...?

Examining the craft window confirmed his suspicions.

—Materials

Purified Blood of the Demon Monarch (1/1)

World Tree Fragment (1/1)

Spring Water from Echo Forest (0/1)

Out of the three ingredients, only Spring Water from Echo Forest was down to zero.

So it uses only the amount necessary instead of the entire item?

It appeared as though crafting had stopped because Spring Water from Echo Forest had run out. It seemed that not much blood was required for the recipe, and the World Tree Fragment had always been quite a large hunk of wood. It made sense that the small jar of Spring Water from Echo Forest had run out first.

Jinwoo smiled.

This isn't exactly bad news.

It meant he could craft more elixirs as long as he acquired more Spring Water from Echo Forest.

Now, the big question remained.

Jinwoo had to forcibly calm himself when he saw not one but six wooden bottles of the Elixir of Life appear on the ground in front of him.

[ITEM: ELIXIR OF LIFE]

Acquisition Difficulty: S

Category: Consumable

A mystical potion that cures all diseases using powerful magic.
An entire bottle must be consumed for the full effect of the potion.

Would this item actually cure his mother?

...I guess I'll find out today.

Excited, Jinwoo carefully stored the six jars of Elixir of Life in his inventory, as well as the leftover ingredients.

But there was still plenty of other items left for him to inspect.

A ring, a sword, two daggers, and even two miscellaneous items.

An S-rank instance-dungeon boss really did drop a ton of loot, but as happy as

Jinwoo was to see so many items, he didn't have time to inspect them all. His priority was to get out of there and see his mother.

Jinwoo stowed all the items he'd acquired from the Demon Monarch, then looked around as he dusted off his hands. He didn't want to miss anything just because he was in a hurry. After all, haste made waste.

Jinwoo glanced over his shoulder and saw his shadow soldiers, who had just destroyed an army ten times their number, all standing at attention in neat rows. Behind them, the corpses of demon soldiers were strewn all over.

But where's the dragon?

Jinwoo's eyes sought out the monster the Demon Monarch had ridden, but he could see only mounds of dead soldiers everywhere he looked.

Did it fly away during the battle?

His worry didn't last long as Iron approached Jinwoo, dragging something huge. It was the dead body of Kaisellin, the winged dragon.

"Dang, that's pretty impressive, Iron."

Iron bashfully scratched the back of his head—or rather, the back of his helmet. It'd been a while since Jinwoo had last complimented him. Jinwoo patted Iron on the shoulder and stood in front of the body.

Just as I thought...

It was as he'd suspected based on the dragon's full title and appearance. Black smoke rose up from the dragon's corpse, signaling that Jinwoo could extract its shadow. Jinwoo held out his arm.

"Arise."

The extraction was quick and easy, since his level had jumped so much.

Skreeee!

With a scream reminiscent of the cry of a beast on the brink of death, a shadowy mass surged out of the dragon's shadow. It immediately recognized its master and approached Jinwoo with its head bowed.

[Please choose a name.]

Oh.

Jinwoo eyed the message in surprise. He'd thought the dragon would only be good for riding, as he hadn't seen its abilities in combat, but it was a knight rank, so it must be relatively skilled. This was remarkable considering Igris, the star of the shadow army, had also been a knight rank until recently. If he thought about it, though, there was no way a demon monarch would choose an inferior monster to ride.

Satisfied with his new soldier's rank, Jinwoo responded. "Kaiselli...no." He decided right then that a nine-letter name was too long.

"Kaisel."

The winged dragon reared his head and roared long and loud into the air at his new name.

Skraaaaaaw!

"Good job, everyone." He recalled the soldiers back into his shadow, including Kaisel.

It was about time to leave the Demon's Castle now, but there was one thing left to do. Jinwoo opened the inbox to read the quest completion message.

[You have completed Quest: Collect Demon Souls (2).]

[The rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

Yes.

At his answer, the system showed him the list of rewards.

Ping!

[YOU HAVE THE FOLLOWING REWARDS.]

Reward 1. Rune stone of the highest rank

Reward 2. Ability Points +30

Reward 3. Mystery Reward

[Would you like to accept all?]

Jinwoo selected the first reward, having been curious about the rune stone ever since he'd initially received the quest.

Let's start with reward one.

Ping!

[The rune stone of the highest rank, Rune Stone: Shadow Exchange, has been delivered.]

The weight of a small stone in his hand accompanied the message. He opened his hand to find a rune stone unlike any other he'd seen before. It seemed to emanate a strange black color that was incomparable to a regular shade of black.

Crsh!

Previously, he'd had to squeeze the stone in his hand to break it, but now he only had to think about crushing it, and it broke apart. Black energy from the rune stone swirled around Jinwoo's body and was absorbed.

Jinwoo promptly checked the skill window.

[SKILL: SHADOW EXCHANGE, LV.1]

Job-exclusive skill.

No mana required.

The caster may switch locations with a designated shadow soldier.

Once used, you may activate it again only after a three-hour cooldown period. Wait times can vary depending on skill level.

Whoa!

Jinwoo's eyes widened as he read the explanation. The cooldown period was a minor drawback, but it was such a handy skill, it made sense that it had some form of limitation.

So I can swap locations with any shadow soldier no matter the place?

In a nutshell, this skill enabled instant teleportation. Jinwoo considered summoning forth a soldier in order to test the skill but quickly changed his mind.

I might as well test this out with a soldier farther away.

He happened to have some soldiers he'd left behind, outside the Demon's Castle. He'd assigned one group to dwell in his sister's shadow and another to patrol the neighborhood.

It's an easy choice.

He couldn't exactly teleport to Jinah; not only would it shock her, but he also didn't know if the skill had any residual effects. And so Jinwoo zeroed in on one of the five soldiers patrolling his neighborhood.

"Shadow Exchange." As soon as he'd uttered those words... "O-oh?"

Jinwoo heard the chime of a notification just as his own shadow swallowed him whole.

[As the boss has been defeated, the dungeon will now revert to its origin...]

The sensation of free-falling didn't last long. The gravitational pull suddenly reversed, and Jinwoo shot up at the same speed he had fallen. His gaze, which could detect only darkness, went back to normal in the blink of an eye.

This is...?

Jinwoo took in his surroundings.

Zzt, zzt...

A flickering streetlight that was most likely defective, a pushcart that leaned precariously against a wall, an electrical pole with torn flyers on it—it was the empty alleyway he often passed on his way home.

This is our neighborhood, isn't it?

Coincidentally, this was same place where he'd ordered his five soldiers to patrol the neighborhood.

I actually changed locations.

He couldn't help feeling gobsmailed, but he was able to collect himself

enough to check under his feet. He'd come from the same shadow out of which his shadow soldiers had risen. He cautiously tapped his shadow with his foot.

.....

When the skill had been activated, his feet had sunk into the shadow as if he'd stepped into a pool of water. But the shadow was back to normal now.

Amazed, Jinwoo looked up the skill info again. The three-hour waiting period before he could reuse the skill had started as per the explanation.

[SKILL: SHADOW EXCHANGE, LV.1]

Job-exclusive...

...may use the skill after 02:59:57.

Amazing...

Jinwoo's heart raced at what he'd experienced for himself.

It all happened so fast.....

He had maintained concentration from the moment he'd been sucked into the shadow. Considering how time had seemed to slow from his perspective while he was in that state, he really had teleported in an instant.

He swallowed hard.

Shadow Exchange. Depending on how he used it, the possibilities were endless.

Oh right, I don't have time for this.

Jinwoo calmed himself and tamped down his mana. He finally had in his hands the medicine that could cure his mother, so there was no time to waste.

He anxiously turned on his phone to check the time.

It's already.....

He frowned as the numbers on the screen told him it was ten o'clock at night. Visiting hours were technically over, but Jinwoo didn't hesitate to summon the shadow of the dragon.

Kaisel.

Kreeeee!

Kaisel excitedly pushed his head out of the ground with a cry at his master's call. Huge wings made up for a lack of arms, and a lizard the size of a truck fully emerged. When Kaisel fully spread his wings, the already narrow alley seemed to get even tighter.

Thankfully, there was no one nearby.

Kaisel lowered his body for easy mounting as Jinwoo approached, and he carefully hopped on. Even though this was his first time riding Kaisel, Jinwoo felt at ease on top of the dragon. It didn't seem like flying would be an issue, either.

I don't care who tries to stop me.

Never mind the hospital staff—he now had the power to break through the police or even the army. Nothing could stop him.

Let's go.

As Jinwoo relayed the command with grim determination, Kaisel began to flap his huge wings.

Skreeeeee!

He shot up into the sky and sped along in the direction Jinwoo had indicated.

* * *

A certain meeting at the Hunter's Association continued late into the night. The Korea-Japan raid on Jeju Island was imminent, and the association was throwing everything it had into it in hopes of finally quelling the ant infestation.

"Here's the intel from Japan." An employee pressed a button on a remote control, and a video that had been filmed by a Japanese satellite using a mana-detecting camera played on a huge screen. The recordings were from the first, second, and third attacks.

President Go's eyes narrowed.

All the ants except the queen and her guards are leaving the colony.

This was as expected. The ants were on the move as per Japan's explanation.

It was quite irritating that several guards remained, but it was also common for bosses of high-rank dungeons to have extra protection.

However, even with the majority of ants out of the way, it was impossible to say the plan was foolproof. President Go was in charge of the Korean side of the operation, so he had to consider every possibility. “How likely is it that the ants will return to the cave earlier than anticipated once they realize the queen is in danger?”

Japan already had a countermeasure in place.

“They said they’d use a disruptive electromagnetic pulse.”

“A disruptive electromagnetic pulse?”

“Unlike regular ants, magic-beast versions communicate with one another on their own unique frequency.”

That was how they could effectively mobilize and command an army of several thousand.

President Go nodded. “And Japan can interfere with this by using an electromagnetic pulse?”

“That’s what they say, Mr. President.”

“And all we’d have to deal with are the queen and her guards.....”

The overall plan was simple, yet it had a higher probable rate of success than any other they’d ever come up with.

So what had President Go so on edge? He rested his chin on his hands.

Maybe the reason I feel uneasy is—

Just then...President Go’s head snapped toward the window. Everyone in the meeting room startled at the association president’s sudden movement.

Manager Jinchul Woo, who was acting as President Go’s personal bodyguard, quickly approached him. “What’s wrong, sir?”

“Just now.....” President Go looked at Jinchul, but the other man’s expression hadn’t changed. “Didn’t you feel that?”

“Sir? I’m not sure what you mean...”

“.....”

An immense wave of mana had swept in from far away. Though fleeting, President Go had definitely sensed it.

.....

When the president’s eyes remained trained on the window, the employee who had been running the presentation cautiously spoke up. “Sir...?”

President Go cocked his head and tore away his gaze. Though he was concerned about the source of this sudden wave, his current priority had to be this meeting. He thought for a second, then turned to the person in charge.

“Are you still unable to reach Hunter Jinwoo Sung?”

* * *

Yoonho Baek stared in the direction of the wave of mana as he asked, “Did you feel that, too?”

Byunggu Min chirped back, “I may be retired, but my rank hasn’t changed.”

A heavy silence fell between the two men drinking together at a neighborhood food stall.

Yoonho turned back around. “What do you think that was?”

“Maybe Jongin and Haein are having a showdown over who gets the Hunters Guild.”

The younger man giggled and tossed back his shot.

Yoonho looked at him as if he was being ridiculous. “Were you trying to be funny?”

“Wasn’t it?”

“...No. Never mind.”

Then again, Byunggu was known for being rather odd, including his sense of humor.

He’s probably the first S-rank hunter in the world to retire with all his limbs intact.

He wasn't just the first—he was also the only one to do so. Considering how much money an S rank could earn, one would be hard-pressed to find another human who'd suddenly quit being a hunter because they were no longer interested. It wasn't like he came from a well-to-do family, either.

Byunggu sensed Yoonho's stare and asked, "Are you really going to go?"

"Yeah."

"You saw how Eunsuk died."

"All the more reason to go back."

Byunggu looked at Yoonho, caught off guard by his answer. Yoonho drained his glass before continuing.

"If we let the ants be, soon the whole of Korea will be infested."

"Since when are you such a patriot...?"

"I'm making up a cool excuse, since I have to go anyway."

Guilds weren't in a position to defy the Hunter's Association's orders. Because the association was so beneficial to guilds, the guilds were obligated to respond to the association's requests.

If Yoonho really wanted to avoid going, he could try fleeing the country. However, no developed country would welcome a high-rank hunter who ran away from a high-level raid, since there was no telling whether such a person wouldn't betray their new nation as well.

It's not like I want to run anyway.

Yoonho snorted.

Byunggu spoke bluntly. "I'm not going. I refuse. If you're here to persuade me, you're wast—"

"No, that's not it."

Yoonho put down money for their drinks and stood. They had just finished the bottle.

"I'm here to say good-bye just in case. I don't know whether I'll get to see you again."

“Yoonho...”

Byunggu gave up dissuading Yoonho as he watched the older hunter wave, already some distance away. Yoonho must have been aware of how dangerous this operation was.

But he's still going regardless.

Yoonho's expression wasn't one of a hunter trembling in fear as he was forcibly dragged along. Rather, he seemed resolved to smash the ant bastards to a pulp this time around. He actually looked somewhat excited.

While Byunggu shook his head in disbelief as he chewed some food, his chopsticks froze in midair.

Wait...come to think of it, there aren't that many hunters who absolutely hate fighting magic beasts, right?

Some healers did, but they tended to be obsessed with healing others instead.

He stared blankly into his fish-cake soup and scratched his head, confused.

Could bloodlust be a requirement for becoming an awakened being?

No, that couldn't be it. Byunggu snickered to himself and drained the rest of his soup.

* * *

Jinwoo quickly arrived at the hospital.

It was...room 305...

From the start, he'd had no intention of entering the hospital through the main entrance. Instead, Jinwoo directed Kaisel to the window of his mother's room.

Ruler's Hand.

The curtain covering the window moved to the side. His mother lay peacefully asleep on the bed, exactly like the last time he'd visited her. Jinwoo used Ruler's Hand once again to open the window and quietly enter the room. Kaisel had already merged into his shadow by this time.

Jinwoo stood beside the bed. His heart was in his throat as he neared the moment of truth.

If anything went wrong, I wouldn't be able to take it back.

His mother had been in a coma for quite some time. There was no telling if she would even be able to swallow the Elixir of Life, nor was there any guarantee she would be fine if she did.

But.....

Up to now, Jinwoo had seen the system work countless miracles. Had he heard about them from someone else, he wouldn't have believed them, but what better source of information was there than his own eyes?

I've come this far, despite having been an E rank.

That was all thanks to the power of the system.

Jinwoo, who'd been staring wordlessly down at his hands, now raised his head. His mother was right there in front of him, looking like she'd wake up as soon as he called out to her.

Jinwoo summoned for the Elixir of Life.

Vmmm...

A wooden bottle appeared in his hand. He read the item information over and over again several times just in case he'd missed anything. Only after reviewing the data enough to have it almost perfectly memorized was he able to work up the courage to pull out the cork.

Pop!

He'd had steady hands when he'd risked his life to fight the Demon Monarch, but now they wouldn't stop shaking. He let out a long, steady breath to calm his nerves.

If I make a mistake, it'll hurt my mother.....

The moment he told himself there could be no mistake, his eyes regained their usual steely resolve, and his hands steadied.

.....Okay.

Jinwoo used his left arm to carefully support the head of his mother, Kyunghye Park. He then placed the bottle against her lips. The Elixir of Life slowly dripped into her mouth as Jinwoo cautiously poured a little bit at a time, careful not to rush things.

This scar.....

He suddenly noticed the burn marks across both sides of his mother's neck that wrapped around to the back. They weren't fully visible from this angle, but Jinwoo knew all too well that her whole nape and part of the back of her head had suffered burns.

Scars inflicted because of me.....

He had merely wanted to wash her hair just as she had his, but at the time, young Jinwoo had been to a public bathhouse only a handful of times and hadn't known anything about water temperature.

Glug, glug, glug...

Squeak...

The scoop had been filled with scalding hot water. He'd carefully approached his mother from behind, doing his best not to spill.

And then...

Splash!

He'd emptied the bucket onto her. Though she'd initially flinched, Kyunghye didn't move, clutching Jinah tightly against her body so as to shield her daughter from the water. Even as her skin turned bright red, she didn't make a sound.

The screams afterward came not from her but from the other ladies nearby.

"Oh! Oh dear!"

"Kyunghye!"

That was when Jinwoo had realized something was wrong, even though he'd simply been trying to help.

He'd dropped the scoop and was about to burst into tears when his mother

grabbed his shoulders tightly and asked, “Jinwoo, are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

Jinwoo had thought he was in big trouble at the time, but to this day, he’d never forgotten what had happened at that bathhouse and her words.

And here I thought I never owed anyone anything...

After his father went missing, Kyunghye had taken care of him and Jinah as a single mother. As a general rule, Jinwoo disliked both owing and giving favors. However, he owed his mother a debt he could never repay.

At that moment...the last drop of the Elixir of Life passed through his mother’s lips.

Plip.

Jinwoo set down the bottle, laid his mother back on the bed, and quietly waited, praying for something to happen.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

His chest ached from the pounding of his heart. He had a lump in his throat.

.....

Nothing happened...but just as a bead of blood fell from Jinwoo’s tightly clenched fist— “Haah...!”

With her eyes shut tight, Kyunghye took in a deep breath like a person who’d narrowly avoided drowning.

.....!

Jinwoo was astonished. A flush was returning to her pale face like color spreading across a black-and-white screen.

Each second felt like an hour. How much time had passed?

His mother slowly opened her eyes. Her gaze roamed around the room before landing on Jinwoo.

“Who...? Is that you, Jinwoo?”

Jinwoo’s heart pounded in his chest, but he managed to nod.

It was understandable that his mother took a moment recognizing him; it had been four years, and his physique had changed quite dramatically. He didn't rush her and waited patiently.

Memories from four years back gradually filled Kyunghye's head like water slowly filling an empty pitcher. It didn't take too long for her to recall why she was lying in a hospital bed.

"How long have I been here?"

"Four years."

Jinwoo could've told her the exact number of days if she asked. He spoke softly to keep his mother as calm as possible.

She was startled to hear how long it had been and asked, "What about Jinah? Is she okay?"

Jinwoo suppressed a sob. His mother had just returned from a limbo between life and death after four years, and her first concern was her daughter's well-being.

He bit his lip to keep from crying.

Now's not the time to worry about Jinah.

That was what he wanted to say, but he kept his emotions in check as much as he could and gave a slight smile.

"Yeah, she's fine."

Kyunghye exhaled, clearly relieved. Though Jinwoo wished his mother would take care of herself more, he found solace in the fact that she hadn't changed.

Everything will go back to normal now.

As it started to sink in that his mother was actually cured, his heart skipped a beat.

Jinwoo suddenly jerked in surprise. The sensation of his mother grasping his hand brought him out of his thoughts.

"Mom?"

"Thank you, son. You kept your promise."

Promise? Oh, right... It had slipped his mind, since it was such a given, he didn't even consider it a promise.

The Eternal Sleep Disease was an illness that plunged a person into deeper and deeper slumber until they couldn't awaken. When it became harder and harder for Kyunghye to function as the sleeping disease worsened, she had asked Jinwoo for a favor.

"If I don't wake up one day, you'll take care of your sister, right?"

She'd smiled lightly like she was asking him to run an errand.

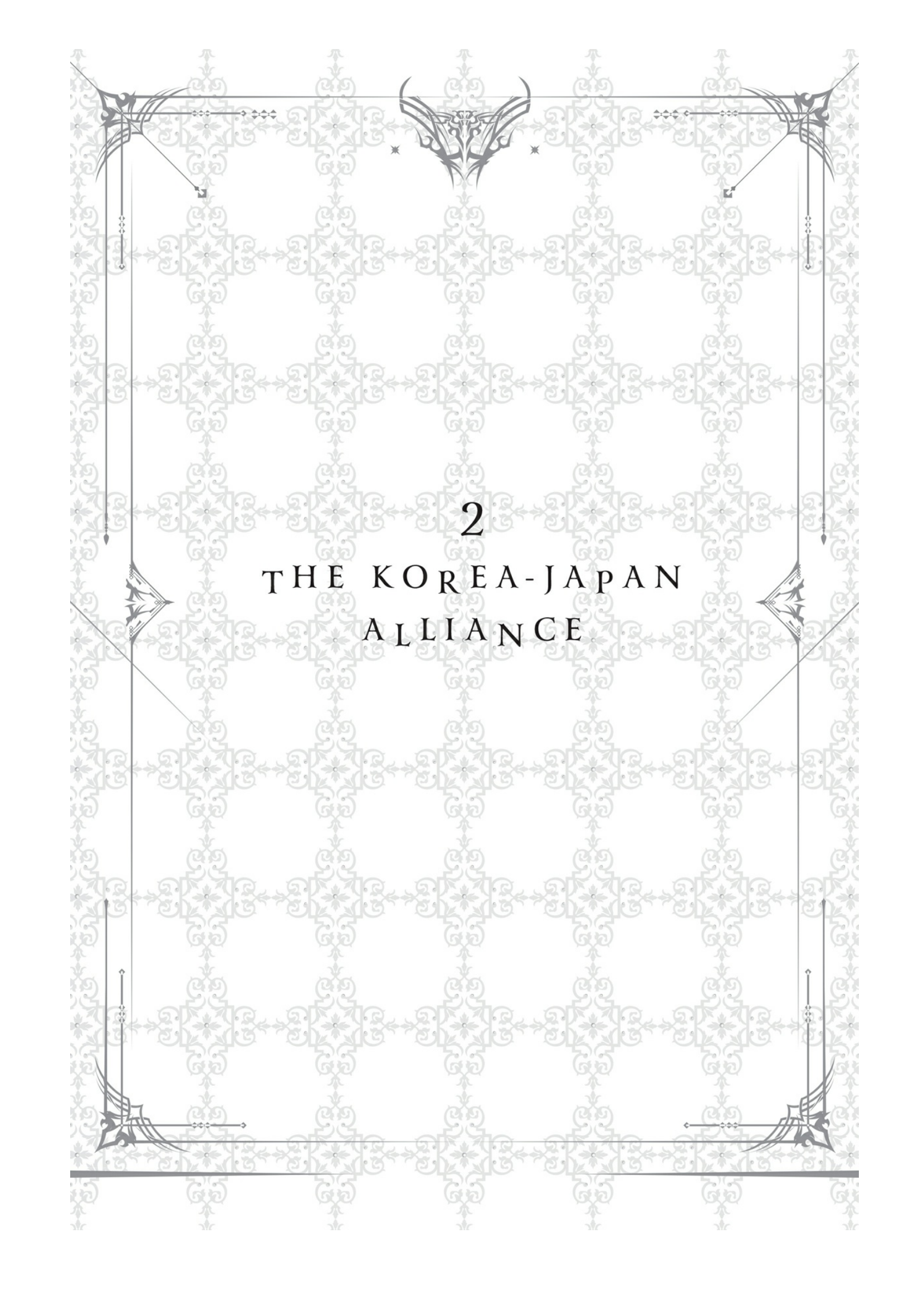
That was why Jinwoo had carried on until now without an ounce of resentment. All he'd done was shoulder the burden she had been carrying.

His mother squeezed his hand tightly as if she knew everything.

"Jinwoo...it must've been hard for you, wasn't it?"

Jinwoo wanted to reassure her by laughing and waving off her concerns...but he couldn't. The tears he'd been holding back streamed down his cheeks as he answered reflexively.

"Yeah."



2

THE KOREA-JAPAN
ALLIANCE



2

THE KOREA-JAPAN ALLIANCE

“What?!”

Dr. Sungchool Lee, chief physician of Seoul Ilshin Hospital, was stunned by the incredible news: A patient with Eternal Sleep Disease had awoken.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Dr. Lee. I’ve confirmed it myself.”

This news would’ve piqued the doctor’s interest even if it had occurred at another hospital, but to think it had happened to a patient in their own hospital...

I can’t believe my luck!

The highly intelligent Dr. Lee started mentally crunching some numbers.

“This is completely unprecedented, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

Kyunghye’s attending physician nodded.

Dr. Lee’s smile was so wide, it seemed his face was about to split. “Good job, Dr. Choi!”

“I beg your pardon? Dr. Lee, I didn’t do any—”

“Oh, come now!” Dr. Lee gave Dr. Choi a knowing look. “It doesn’t matter how it happened. If a patient is cured, then of course the physician should be praised!”

And naturally, the hospital that employed the doctor should as well!

“Oh, yes... Thank you, Dr. Lee.”

The attending physician reluctantly bowed, but the lukewarm reaction did nothing to quell Dr. Lee’s huge grin from this unanticipated but excellent news.

If I play my cards right, I can have the eyes of the whole world on Ilshin Hospital!

If he got some buzz going and people started talking, it would be free publicity. The hospital would have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Once word got out, the hospital would be crawling with reporters from around the world looking for a scoop. This was a golden opportunity to advertise the hospital’s name without expending any money or energy.

Reporters are going to want to know about the treatment.....

He and his team could carefully examine the patient and piece things together. That shouldn’t be a problem at all—or so he thought. But Dr. Choi glanced awkwardly at him and carefully spoke up.

“The patient’s guardian has asked for the patient to be discharged.”

“What?”

No, that couldn’t happen! Reporters would only come if the patient was in the hospital.

No, never mind the reporters. They needed her to remain in their care in order to figure out how she’d been cured.

Dr. Lee’s eyebrows twitched. “How is the patient doing?”

“Everything is normal.”

“She’s physically okay after being bedridden and asleep for four years?”

“Perhaps it’s thanks to the life-support system?”

“Hmm.....”

He had always thought that having such high-performance machines might be an issue.

“Postpone her release for as long as possible. Tell them we still need to monitor the patient.”

We can't exactly force her to stay without a reason if she wants to leave...

They were left with one move: announce the news before the patient was discharged.

"Let's send out a press release while she's still here."

Dr. Choi shook his head. "That...would be difficult, Dr. Lee."

"Why?"

"We're not at liberty to disclose the patient's identity. If we mishandle this situation, we could be in big trouble."

The chief physician was taken aback by the unexpected words from his colleague, but something in Dr. Choi's eyes told Dr. Lee it wasn't an empty warning.

Dr. Lee discreetly asked, "Is the patient some kind of VIP?"

"It's not the patient but her guardian... He was also the one who asked us to keep her identity under wraps."

Dr. Lee picked up on how respectful Dr. Choi was being while talking about this guardian.

"Just who is this person anyway?"

How incredible was he for his family to have their identities protected and for Dr. Choi to be so mindful of how he spoke about him?

"Do you know of Mr. Jinwoo Sung?"

"Jinwoo Sung?"

Was he a powerful politician or the CEO of some big company? The name sounded familiar, but Dr. Lee couldn't quite place it. He shook his head, and Dr. Choi promptly explained.

"He's the hunter who was recently evaluated as an S rank."

"An S rank...!"

So this was why Dr. Choi was being so wary. To think the guardian would be an S-rank hunter of all things...

If I made any hasty decisions and something went wrong, I'd be toast.

Not only did S-rank hunters have a tremendous influence on society, if someone incurred their wrath...

Dr. Lee's mouth went dry from this bolt out of the blue.

That was close.

He thawed his stunned expression and adopted a light smile.

"Discharge the patient immediately."

"You agree with that, then?"

"Yes, of course." Dr. Lee chuckled, maintaining a pleasant grin.

Of course they needed to discharge her. What would they get out of irritating an S-rank hunter?

He said so in not so many words.

"We can't force a healthy patient to stay, now, can we?"

"Understood, Dr. Lee."

Dr. Choi left right away, and once Dr. Lee was alone...

"Phew..."

He let out a sigh of relief as he stared at the closed door to his office.

* * *

Jinah dropped everything and rushed to the hospital as soon as she received the call.

Jinwoo stood at his mother's bedside when he felt his sister's presence rapidly approaching.

Kerchak.

The door opened.

"Mom? Mom?"

Jinah's face was drenched in tears even before she entered the room.

"My dear, you've grown so much."

Jinah had been in middle school when their mother had last seen her, so Kyunghye's surprise was evident as she took in her daughter as a fully grown young adult. She quickly recovered, though, and threw her arms open wide with the warmest smile on her face, and as she did...

"Mom!" Jinah threw herself into her mother's embrace.

Jinwoo paused. It wasn't the best way to treat a patient who'd just woken up from a four-year-long coma, but he couldn't bring himself to stop his sobbing sister.

"Mom....."

Jinah usually presented herself as mature for her age, so it was easy to forget that she was still technically a child. Jinwoo's heart ached, seeing his usually cheerful sister like this.

"All right—"

Jinwoo was about to pull Jinah back, but Kyunghye shook her head and brought a finger to her lips. Her other hand never once stopped patting her daughter's back.

Jinwoo sighed quietly and stepped back. As he watched his sister in their mother's arms and the gentle expression on their mother's face, he couldn't help but smile.

It was all worth it.

He felt like his efforts had been rewarded in this moment, like a block of ice in a corner of his heart had melted away. So he'd let them be for a while longer, at least until Jinah was able to compose herself. She was a smart kid and definitely knew she shouldn't tire her mother; she just needed a little time.

Jinwoo turned his head toward the window, still grinning. The sun was out, as if to celebrate the family's reunion.

He absentmindedly stared out the window awhile before pulling out his cell phone.

.....

He couldn't even begin to attempt to reply to the countless missed calls and

messages blowing up his phone. He scrolled through the notifications for a while before finally giving up and clearing them.

I'm sure they'll try again if they really need me.

He pulled up an Internet browser instead. That was when...

Ack!

He casually went to a news site, and what he saw made his brow furrow.

Magic Beast Spotted in Skies of Downtown Seoul?

The Destination of Flying Magic Beast Is...?

Hunter's Association Fails to Respond. Who Will Keep Us Safe?

Photos of Kaisal were all over the news. Despite the distance between Jinwoo's neighborhood and the hospital, he hadn't thought anyone would notice because he'd arrived in an instant.

So many pictures in such a short period of time.

Fortunately, none of the photos clearly showed him riding Kaisal. When he'd called forth Kaisal yesterday, he'd decided not to care about what others might think, but as he looked through all the news chatter, he wasn't as sure of himself anymore.

Now that I think about it.....

Whose heart wouldn't sink at the sight of a giant magic beast flying through the sky? As he read through the anxiety-laden articles, Jinwoo resolved to be more careful going forward.

No need to intentionally freak people out.

Thinking back, he hadn't initially wanted the job of necromancer precisely because he didn't think he could handle the way others would look at him.

Though if this is how people react to an overgrown lizard with wings, imagine the uproar if they ever laid eyes on Fang when he has the Sphere of Avarice.

While he pondered this...

Vrrr, vrrr.

His phone started vibrating.

Who could this be?

Jinwoo stepped outside the hospital room to answer the unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Hunter Sung.”

It was an old man with a low but cheery voice. Jinwoo put a name to the voice right away.

“President Go?”

“Yes, it’s Gunhee Go of the Hunter’s Association.”

A call from the association president?

Why would the esteemed President Go of the Hunter’s Association be calling Jinwoo?

Jinwoo moved away from the busy hallway to a more secluded area.

“May I ask why you’re calling me?”

“You’ve probably heard already.”

Heard what?

Jinwoo cocked his head, unsure of what President Go meant.

“I don’t believe I know what you’re talking about...?”

“Haven’t you watched the news?”

Wow, word really did travel fast.

Jinwoo easily admitted, “No. I’m so sorry about that. I’ll be careful from now on.”

“Pardon?”

At the president’s confused tone, Jinwoo suddenly realized they weren’t talking about the same thing.

This isn't about Kaisei?

What else would be on the news...? The double dungeon, the red gate, clearing an A-rank dungeon, the Sphere of Avarice...? The more he thought about it, the more Jinwoo realized how much of his adventures would be newsworthy.

"...What's going on?"

"I guess you really haven't heard yet."

"I've been somewhere a little hard to reach and just got back."

This wasn't a lie per se.

President Go's voice went even deeper than usual.

"Hunter Sung."

From Jinwoo's experience, this change in tone usually meant the caller was getting to the point of the conversation.

"May we speak in person?"

Jinwoo was even more curious now than when he'd first picked up the phone.

Not only is the president of the association personally calling me, but he also wants to see me?

How serious could this matter be? Nonetheless...Jinwoo looked back toward his mother's room.

I can't meet him here.

He'd hate to get his mother mixed up in anything unnecessarily.

"I can go to you."

"Would you please?"

"Of course."

That would be more convenient for Jinwoo.

After wrapping up the phone call, Jinwoo told his mother he had an important errand to run and hurried off.

The sunlight irritated his eyes after having spent so much time within the sunless Demon's Castle. He squinted up.

Ugh, should I just ride Kaisel there?

He thought about it for a second, snickered to himself, and went to flag down a taxi.

* * *

The video, recorded by a CCTV camera, was shocking.

It showed a quiet road, so quiet that very few cars appeared on it even when fast-forwarded. It looked like a suburban area, possibly rural.

The video stopped fast-forwarding and continued in slow motion. Just then...a car entered the scene. Even in slow motion, it was apparent that the car was speeding along.

After a split second, a black object materialized before the oncoming car. It was a living creature that stood on two feet like a human. The car didn't have time to decelerate or brake at the speed it was traveling, yet there was no collision.

Right before the point of impact, the car was lifted into the air. The dark creature threw the oncoming midsize sedan to the ground with one hand, pulled the unconscious driver out of the wreckage, and proceeded to devour him headfirst.

Crunch, crunch!

Had the CCTV also been capable of recording audio, that would've been the sound coming through the speakers. The video ended there.

Jinwoo turned away from the huge monitor that took up an entire wall of the president's office and looked at President Go, who was seated across from him.

President Go quietly placed the remote control down on the table.

"Three hundred."

Unlike others, he didn't speak glibly about another country's tragedies.

"That's the number of people killed by that single ant."

“Were the Japanese hunters late to respond?”

“No, not at all.” President Go shook his head. “I was told it took less than thirty minutes for hunters to arrive on the scene. In that short period of time, a whole village was razed to the ground.”

Japan had one of the best networks of hunters in all of Asia, so if a country like that could suffer such losses, what would happen if one of those ants flew into mainland Korea?

President Go had watched the video several times but still got chills with every viewing.

We absolutely need to exterminate them before it's too late.

The operation would be underway in four days. Japan had been demanding all week to see a list of the participating Korean hunters. As the representative of the Korean side, President Go had been putting off giving them that list. There was only one reason why: He hadn't been able to contact Jinwoo until now.

The moment he could finalize the list had arrived at long last. President Go's heart started racing as he addressed Jinwoo.

“We are going to Jeju Island to get rid of the ants once and for all.” His desperation shone in his eyes. “But in order to do that, we need your help, Hunter Sung.”

President Go tensed. If Jinwoo turned him down, there was nothing he could do. Jinwoo didn't belong to a guild, nor was he duty bound to help the association. The decision rested solely on his own will.

After agonizing over it, Jinwoo spoke up.

“I—”

* * *

After the meeting with the president wrapped up, Jinwoo was standing to leave but suddenly whipped around when he sensed something strange.

What's that?

He sensed clashes of mana nearby.

A dungeon break?

That was his first thought, but he quickly dismissed it. He could clearly discern that the emanating mana belonged to multiple hunters rather than a magic beast.

“Is something the matter?” President Go stood by the door to see Jinwoo out.

“It’s nothing, but...I think hunters are fighting nearby.”

“That can’t be.” President Go chuckled.

What kind of brazen hunters would dare brawl near the Hunter’s Association Headquarters? That would never happen.

Wait... The direction Hunter Sung is looking is...?

He abruptly recalled, “S-rank hunters are currently training in the gymnasium. Is that what you’re picking up by any chance?”

Training?

That would certainly explain the continuous yet restrained bursts of magic power.

Jinwoo nodded. “I see.”

The president looked at Jinwoo with amazement.

He can sense them from this distance?

The association’s gym was built to contain magic power and keep it from leaking outside. President Go himself couldn’t feel a thing. However, not only could Jinwoo detect magic power coming from the gym but also that they were fighting.

Just how sharp is his perception...?

The president couldn’t begin to hazard a guess.

“Oh, would you like to go to the gym yourself?” the president asked mildly.

It wasn’t every day that all these S ranks gathered together like this. Plus, as a newly minted S rank, Jinwoo wouldn’t want to miss the opportunity to see what the other S ranks could do.

“Mr. Ryuji Goto is there as well.”

Jinwoo had been mulling over the offer but now froze at this new information.

“By Ryuji Goto, you mean...?”

“Indeed.”

Every hunter—heck, every person—knew the name of the most powerful hunter from Japan.

“Yes, *the* Ryuji Goto. He’s here to help train the Korean and Japanese hunters to work together. But he’s leaving tomorrow, so this would be your only chance to meet him.”

The best Korean hunters *and* Japan’s most powerful hunter all in the same place?

I can’t miss this.

Jinwoo excitedly accepted President Go’s invitation.

* * *

Meanwhile, Ryuji was fighting back a yawn.

These are the best Korea has to offer?

They were terrible—no, they were pathetic. *Terrible* was an objective evaluation while *pathetic* had some sympathy mixed in.

If Korea’s safety is in their hands, wouldn’t it be better to have Japan protect them?

Ryuji smirked as he watched the hunters.

There was one, though—a single decent candidate among the Korean S ranks.

I believe her name is Haein Cha, right?

Still, she was only comparable to Japan’s high-rank hunters. She couldn’t hold a candle to the Japanese elite.

Well, I guess that’s expected.

Korea was a country that was small in both size and population. For their

most powerful awakened being to be an old man who could no longer fight and whose days were numbered...

Gunhee Go is on par with our strongest hunters, but...

This was unfortunate for Korea.

He'd finished assessing the abilities of the Korean hunters, which had been his real reason for staying in Korea.

If we withdraw during the attack, they won't even last five minutes.

Ryuji concluded that he'd seen enough and turned to leave when he noticed someone entering the gym.

Hmm.....?

His eyebrows twitched. He hadn't realized someone was approaching until they were this close. In fact, he still couldn't sense the person's presence despite looking straight at him.

Is this an assassin-class hunter?

He turned to the translator assigned to him by the Hunter's Association.

"Who's that person?"

The employee adjusted their glasses and stared at the newcomer for a while before finally recognizing the face and smiling.

"Oh, he's the newly registered S-rank hunter."

"Ah..."

The reawakened being with the mysterious background. Ryuji had intended to dig up information on this person while he was in Korea, so this was an excellent turn of events.

He offered a wide grin to the translator.

"I assume he's quite an excellent assassin."

"Pardon?"

He wondered why the translator was looking at him funny.

"Did I say something wrong?"

“No, I mean...”

The translator gestured at the man standing in the entryway.

“He’s a mage-class hunter.”

How’s that possible?

Ryuji pulled up the Hunter’s Association website and looked through the list of S-rank hunters in disbelief. The browser automatically translated the text for him.

Jinwoo Sung, S rank, mage class

It was true. The picture on the profile matched the man’s face.

He’s really a mage?

Shocked, Ryuji looked up from the screen.

The hunter had approached the group.

* * *

That’s Ryuji Goto?

Jinwoo recognized the strongest hunter from Japan at once. He was tall and smartly dressed, with a neatly trimmed mustache. At a glance, he could be mistaken for an actor.

But why is he staring at me?

Just as Jinwoo began to feel uncomfortable from the piercing gaze, Ryuji nodded at Jinwoo. Perhaps it was because they’d never met before? Jinwoo returned the nod, then looked around the gym.

In the center of the room, a shirtless Yoonho Baek was sparring with a massive middle-aged man. Everyone except Ryuji was watching the fight intently.

Whoosh!

Yoonho batted away the other’s hand, twisted his lower body, and delivered a powerful, low kick.

Whak!

And yet, it was Yoonho who grimaced.

Oh...

Jinwoo could tell why. The larger man had instantly protected his leg using a Reinforcement skill. Based on his body type and abilities, the man appeared to be a tank, but his agility stat was way above average—as expected of an S rank.

The man snorted.

“Come, Master Baek! How come a young man such as yourself is so weak?”

“I’m not a master, Master Ma.”

The larger man, Master Ma, guffawed and tightened his uniform belt. The sight of someone with the body of a sumo wrestler wearing a judo uniform looked quite strange.

“In that case...”

After fixing his uniform, he quickly lunged at Yoonho, who in turn unleashed his magic power to counter him.

The two men appeared to be having fun. Both Master Ma on the offensive and Yoonho on the defensive seemed to be enjoying themselves. They were relishing the rare opportunity to cut loose and spar with a fellow S rank.

“If Yoonho unleashed his full power, Master Ma wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Jongin approached Jinwoo and struck up a conversation. The two exchanged nods in greeting, and Jongin continued.

“The man in the *judogi* is Dongwook Ma from the Fame Guild.”

Ah... Jinwoo thought he’d heard the name before, and sure enough, the man was a guild master of one of the top guilds.

Curious, Jinwoo asked, “It’s not like he has to go easy on him, so why is President Baek holding back?”

“He doesn’t like using his full power with so many people watching. He transforms into a real monster when he goes all out.”

Back at the red gate, Jinwoo had seen Yoonho’s beast-like eyes.

I guess it's not just his eyes that transform.

Some of the highest-rank hunters had unique abilities, similar to Baek's transformation ability—in other words, monstrous abilities. Jinwoo's would probably be described in the same terms.

What's the difference between a person who transforms into a monster and a person who summons monsters?

Jinwoo laughed in spite of himself, thinking how other people would find him fascinating the same way he considered President Baek. But that's all he thought of President Baek's power: fascinating. There wasn't much else to see during the battle between President Baek and Master Ma.

They're slow.

Jinwoo was able to track their blows without even trying.

Right then...

"Huh?"

Yoonho spotted something and came to a halt. At the same time, Master Ma froze. Both their eyes simultaneously fixed on Jinwoo, as if they had choreographed it.

Was it that obvious he was bored?

.....?

But too many people were looking at him for that to be the case. Jinwoo soon realized why.

It's not me. It's something behind me...

He turned his head to see Ryuji Goto there, staring at him intensely. The translator spoke to Jinwoo in his stead.

"Sir, Mr. Goto has a request."

Jinwoo had known that Ryuji was approaching him slowly, but he hadn't expected the man to want to address him directly. He raised an eyebrow.

He's been looking at me strangely for a while...

Was Jinwoo telegraphing his discomfort?

Ryuji softly asked, “Will you spar with me?”



3

RYUJI GOTO



3

RYUJI GOTO

Ryuji didn't have an ulterior motive. He was in Korea to evaluate with his own eyes the highest-ranking Korean hunters, and his curiosity just happened to be piqued by a slightly unique individual among them.

It should be easy to confirm whether this guy really is a mage.

Ryuji still wasn't convinced that the man standing in front of him wasn't a brawler.

Data. He needed more information on Jinwoo in order to eliminate any unknown variables during the mission.

Though this should also be fun...

A smile tugged on his lips.

The translator was unnerved by his request.

"M-Mr. Goto, are you serious?"

"Please tell this gentleman exactly what I just said."

"But, sir..."

"Is there a problem?"

Ryuji's question was innocent enough, but his actual message was clear. Why couldn't he work out with the Korean hunters himself?

The translator began to sweat and reluctantly agreed.

"I... I'll ask."

The translator hesitated as they turned and met Jinwoo's eyes but eventually

managed to speak.

“Mr. Goto...is asking if you would like to...practice with him?”

There was no need to explain what Ryuji meant by *practice*.

Jinwoo looked at Ryuji, who awaited his answer. It was hard to tell what the Japanese man was actually thinking behind that smile.

Is he trying to see what I can do?

Someone as renowned as Ryuji Goto wasn't interested in merely flaunting his skills. If he only wanted to show off, he would've challenged Jongin or Yoonho, the leaders of the top two Korean guilds.

I'm not sure what his end goal is, but...

Ryuji had had his eye on Jinwoo from the start, so it seemed as if he was genuinely interested in Jinwoo.

In any case, Jinwoo wasn't opposed to the suggestion. In fact, he was eager to accept. He wanted to test the skills he'd nurtured in the Demon's Castle and was curious about the abilities of Japan's best hunter.

Ryuji wasn't the only one who was curious about his opponent's abilities.

...Huh?

Ryuji's grin slid off his face, and his brow furrowed.

He's smiling?

He had expected Jinwoo to be intimidated and bow out, but the other hunter looked relaxed.

Did he have some kind of ace up his sleeve? Or was he feeling troubled and letting out a nervous smile? He soon got his answer.

Jinwoo said something startling to the translator, who seemed to be trying to change the hunter's mind, but Jinwoo assuaged their worries with a laugh.

Ryuji frowned at not being able to understand Korean.

Just what are they saying...?

It should be a simple yes or no. What was there for a translator, as a third-

party observer, to make such a fuss about? Ryuji was getting impatient when the translator finally reported back to him while carefully eyeing Jinwoo.

“Uhhh...Mr. Goto?”

Had no one else been watching, Ryuji would’ve barked at the translator to spit it out. Instead, he raised his eyebrows questioningly and forced a smile as he waited for the translator to continue.

“Hunter Sung accepts your challenge, but...”

“But?”

“He’d like to set a condition.”

A condition?

Ryuji was expecting Jinwoo to raise a white flag, but here he was making demands. This time, Ryuji couldn’t hide his bewilderment.

“What condition?”

“Hunter Sung said...”

The translator glanced at Jinwoo, who encouraged them to continue.

“He says he’ll accept if you intend to give it your all, Mr. Goto.”

Ryuji’s head whipped around.

Is he serious?

Jinwoo didn’t look like he was joking. Ryuji cocked his head.

Is it possible...he doesn’t know who I am?

That wasn’t likely, and even if he didn’t, the translator had definitely filled him in just now. So the question was, was Jinwoo being arrogant or ignorant?

Interesting...

The smile had long disappeared from Ryuji’s face. Initially, he was merely going to keep pace with his opponent and wrap things up quickly once he’d gotten a sense of his abilities. But he’d changed his mind.

Fortunately, there was an S-rank healer on the premises in case of any accidents.

“Fine.”

“Ah!” The translator’s face paled.

Jinwoo had just become an S rank, so he was perhaps unable to control his passionate enthusiasm, but why would Mr. Goto, a man who’d experienced plenty of adversity, agree to this? They were at the point of no return now, though.

“Who’s the man in front of the Japanese hunter?”

“That’s...Hunter Jinwoo Sung, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Are they going to spar?”

The other S-rank hunters and association employees gathered around the two men who were about to face off. They looked on, equal parts excited and concerned. Haein was among them.

Is Jinwoo going to be okay...?

His opponent was the best hunter in all of Japan, a country that boasted more than twenty S-rank hunters. Jinwoo, who’d been reevaluated as an S rank just a few days ago, was a mere rookie, if one disregarded his experience as an E-rank hunter. Under normal circumstances, it would only be right to stop Jinwoo.

Jinwoo was the savior of the elite strike squad of Haein’s Hunters Guild. She wasn’t the type of person who would stand idly by and let her hero get into a dangerous situation with an obvious outcome...except, when she stepped forward to defuse the situation, she recalled something from that day: the warning look Jinwoo had given her to not interfere despite facing an A-rank dungeon boss and over a hundred high orcs.

Any time she remembered that look, her heart fluttered and her anticipation flared up. That was why she couldn’t bring herself to interfere, and she lightly bit her lower lip instead.

At that moment...

“Are you okay with being so close to other hunters today?”

Yoonho Baek stood next to her. He’d done several raids with Haein long ago and knew about her condition.

“It’s not like I’ll be able to block my nose on Jeju Island, so...”

Yoonho nodded his understanding.

Haein asked in turn, “You’ve met Hunter Sung before, right?”

“Yes.”

She recalled that Jinwoo similarly had lent a hand to the White Tiger Guild as well.

“Shouldn’t you stop him?”

“Normally, I would.”

No wonder, considering his opponent.

Haein blinked. “So then...?”

Yoonho turned to look Haein directly in the eyes. “I won’t for the same reason you aren’t, Hunter Cha.”

Haein shivered, startled that Yoonho seemed to have read her mind. Her usually calm demeanor shifted.

“What do you mean...?”

“Are you not feeling strangely excited?”

She couldn’t deny it. Her heart was racing as a thought popped into her head.

Maybe Hunter Sung can...

“I feel the same way.” Yoonho smiled at her and turned toward the two stars of the show. His eyes were sparkling.

If I’m right and Hunter Sung is an awakened being whose abilities can grow...

Finally, it was the moment of truth.

Ryuji was the first to raise his fists.

The translator standing next to him scrambled out of the way. Not only were two S-rank hunters about to spar, but one of them was lauded as the strongest hunter in all of Japan. Ordinary people could lose their lives if they were caught in the middle.

Jinwoo waited for the translator to reach a safe distance before also raising his fists up...or at least, trying to, when— *Whoosh!*

Without delay, Ryuji swung at the space where Jinwoo's head used to be.

Ryuji was taken aback.

I missed?

His attempt to restore his battered dignity by knocking Jinwoo out with one punch had failed. Jinwoo had avoided the punch by dodging his head to the side and putting some distance between them. His reaction time was impressive.

He's a mage hunter despite moving like this?

Impossible. He had no idea why the Hunter's Association of Korea was concealing this man's abilities, but Ryuji was sure his eyes weren't betraying him. Jinwoo had to be an assassin-class brawler. He was lightning quick, and his footsteps made no sound.

He may be able to deceive others, but he can't fool me.

Ryuji smirked. He wanted to expose Jinwoo until the Korean man was laid completely bare. He hadn't been this excited in quite some time.

Jinwoo, who was now far enough from Ryuji, stood listening to his own heartbeat.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump...

His heart was pounding. He could sense that Ryuji's strength was on a completely different level from the other S-rank hunters, but what rose within Jinwoo whenever he felt Ryuji's incredible mana wash over him was confidence.

This man is the best in Japan...

Jinwoo was finally realizing just how much of an improvement leveling up to 97 truly was. His assuredness was clearly etched on his face.

On the other hand, Ryuji's expression hardened.

He's smiling again?

How dare he! Ryuji huffed in annoyance. He emitted an incredible amount of mana that bore down on everyone.

The hunters on the sidelines shuddered.

Shouldn't we stop them?

Ryuji Goto is actually going to take this sparring seriously, isn't he?

On the other hand, Jinwoo pressed his lips in a thin smile. This was exactly what he wanted.

Conversely, Jinwoo's calm in the face of his display of magic power angered Ryuji. The fire in his eyes flared, and he pounced like an angry beast before any of the other hunters could stop him.

The distance between them shrank as Ryuji thrust out his fist. Jinwoo leaned backward, avoiding the attack.

.....!

Ryuji's eyes shook. How had Jinwoo dodged his attack? Was this also luck, or...?

With a myriad of thoughts racing through his head, Ryuji relentlessly attacked Jinwoo. However, none of his strikes landed. He either missed by a hair or was blocked by Jinwoo.

How is this happening...?

Cold sweat began running down Ryuji's forehead.

Ryuji's spectacular barrage and Jinwoo's close calls had everyone else enraptured.

"What a frightening offense."

"I can hardly follow their moves."

"Hunter Sung is hanging in there, though."

"It's quite impressive he's dodging that well."

Haein knew better.

Hunter Sung isn't "hanging in there."

It was easy to assume Jinwoo was merely holding his own against Ryuji's nonstop assault, but it was actually the opposite.

Haein swallowed hard, astonished.

He's egging on Ryuji to keep attacking him!

If she was seeing this right...Jinwoo was both assessing his opponent's abilities while matching his level to Ryuji's...something feasible only if he was actually several times more powerful than his opponent.

How is that possible...?

Something unheard of was happening right before her eyes. It dawned on her that she needed to stop these men, not for Jinwoo's sake but for...

Just as her thoughts reached that conclusion, she spotted Yoonho shaking next to her.

"President Baek...?"

She called out to him quietly, but he didn't answer. His eyes were fixed on Jinwoo. Haein inspected his complexion, then suddenly flinched.

His eyes are...

President Baek's eyes were beast-like and glowing yellow. His pupils had narrowed vertically and were vibrating in shock. He was oblivious to Haein's concern.

Yoonho could see everything clearly with Eyes of a Beast.

I...I was right.

Jinwoo's power was unfathomably greater than the last time Yoonho had seen him back at the association headquarters.

A hunter who can get stronger...!

Yoonho's whole body trembled with delight.

But right then...

"Ah." Yoonho, who had been watching Jinwoo closely, gave an involuntary gasp.

Haein also spun back around after sensing a chilling energy.

"Oh!"

A few seconds earlier, Ryuji himself knew best that he was being pulled into Jinwoo's rhythm. As someone who had always held the title of "strongest," the Japanese hunter felt like his pride was being flushed down the drain.

How dare he treat me like this...?

Ryuji's eyes filled with rage as Jinwoo dodged his perfectly aimed blow to the other man's weak spot.

I'll kill him!

Jinwoo's eyes widened. He felt Ryuji's hostility prickling at his skin.

Hostile energy?

Jinwoo's heart sank. Whenever someone attempted to kill him, the system would send him an urgent quest. What if he received an order to kill Ryuji...?

Ping!

Jinwoo looked up upon hearing the chime.

[Warning! An individual with murderous intent is close by!]

Luckily, it was only a warning and not the urgent quest he'd received when facing Dongsuk Hwang or Taesik Kang.

However...

Whoosh!

Ryuji's sharp nails scratched his cheek. Had Jinwoo not reflexively turned his head when he did, he would've lost an eye. Ryuji was clearly going for the kill by aiming for a vital area, even though this was a simple training session.

Krackle...

There was an instant shift in mood.

"Ah!" Yoonho let out another involuntary gasp.

Ryuji was the first to sense the change. His body registered it before his mind. The chill in the air gave him goose bumps, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. He had never experienced such a sensation before.

What is this...?

Before he could make sense of the situation, Jinwoo had already grabbed his wrist. Ryuji tried in vain to break free.

How can he be so strong...?

Ryuji's eyes moved from his wrist up to Jinwoo's face. The other man's gaze was like ice, but what really caught Ryuji's attention was Jinwoo's bulging forearm and right shoulder. Jinwoo's arm was pulled as far back as it could go and aimed straight at Ryuji's face.

The heavy tension weighed down on Ryuji's shoulders, and he suddenly felt suffocated.

For some reason, the word *death* popped into his head at that very moment.

But then...

"Enough!"

President Baek and Haein appeared at Jinwoo's side, restraining his right arm. Yoonho grappled with Jinwoo's shoulder while Haein clutched his wrist with all her might.

When Jinwoo looked over his shoulder, Yoonho shook his head, and Haein peered at him nervously.

.....

Jinwoo was able to calm himself because the two had thrown themselves into the fray to frantically hold him back.

"Haah..." Jinwoo exhaled and released Ryuji.

The Japanese man withdrew a few steps while massaging his freed wrist.

Yoonho addressed the translator, who had rushed to Ryuji's side.

"Please tell Mr. Goto the training session is over, as it's getting a little too heated."

The translator nodded. After hearing Yoonho's words, Ryuji frowned at Jinwoo before turning abruptly and leaving the gym without a good-bye.

"M-Mr. Goto!" The translator's plaintive voice called out as they ran after Ryuji.

President Baek breathed a sigh of relief and then bowed to Jinwoo.

“My apologies for interrupting you.”

“.....”

“He has to lead the Japanese team in a few days, so I had to put a stop to things before it got out of hand.” Yoonho eyed Jinwoo tentatively. “Did I do something I shouldn’t have?”

“No, it’s fine,” Jinwoo readily admitted.

President Baek was right. If anything happened to Ryuji, it would jeopardize the mission, and both countries would pay the price. Jinwoo had no intention of faulting President Baek or Haein for stepping in when they did.

Wow!

The enraptured onlookers approached now that the coast was clear. The way they regarded Jinwoo was different. The first to reach him was Dongwook Ma, the hulking guild master of the Fame Guild.

“Oh-ho!” Dongwook chortled. “You sparred with the great Ryuji Goto and came out of it with just a single scratch on your cheek. You’re not so bad yourself!”

Regrettably, no one except Haein and Yoonho fully comprehended what had just happened.

“Oooh! How firm! Look at these muscles!” Dongwook said admiringly as he gripped Jinwoo’s shoulder and arm. “My guild is comprised of mostly mage hunters, so we don’t have enough brawlers. Master Sung, if you don’t have any other guild in mind, would you like to join us?”

“About that, Master Ma...” Jongin, who had been quietly watching the situation unfold from a distance, stepped in.

“Hmm?”

Jongin explained, “Hunter Sung is a mage class.”

Dongwook blinked in surprise.

“What?!”

Elsewhere, Ryuji quickly put some distance between himself and the translator before performing a quick self-evaluation.

.....

His wrist was black and blue. Although it wasn't that warm out, sweat beaded on his forehead.

Ryuji took out his phone and called a familiar number. The person on the other end answered after a few rings.

Beep.

"Shigeo Matsumoto speaking."

"Mr. President."

"Goto? What's wrong?"

Ryuji tried to calm the shakiness in his voice.

"There's...there's an incredible hunter here in Korea."

"Better than you?"

"Possibly."

"....."

"We may have to alter our plans a bit."

There was a silent beat as President Matsumoto rooted around for something.

"What's the hunter's name?"

"Jinwoo Sung. He's the recently reawakened S rank."

"That's strange. There's nobody by that name..."

"Pardon?"

There was nobody by that name? Had Ryuji encountered a ghost or something? He certainly felt like he'd been possessed by one. But Ryuji himself had seen Jinwoo listed on the association's website as a mage-class hunter.

"There's no Jinwoo Sung? What do you mean?"

“Actually, I just received the finalized roster of Korean hunters.”

“Are you saying there’s no Sung on the list?”

That couldn’t be. Was President Go crazy? Why would he plan for a raid without including such a strong hunter?

President Matsumoto read off the list.

“Jongin Choi, Dongwook Ma, Yoonho Baek, Haein Cha, Taegyu Lim, Byunggu Min.”

He spoke with conviction, as if trying to convince Ryuji that everything would be fine.

“Those six are the only members of the Korean team due to depart in four days.”

* * *

President Baek took a deep breath. His heart was still racing even after the two who had caused a sensation in the gymnasium were long gone.

To think it’d be actually possible...

He was amazed he’d witnessed something that had been a mere theory in his mind.

An actual reawakened being who can increase his abilities...

What would Jinwoo’s net worth be? Yoonho couldn’t even begin to guess. That was why he had only watched Jongin, Dongwook, and Taegyu from a distance as they’d tried to recruit Jinwoo for their respective guilds.

Yoonho recalled Jongin’s baffled gaze at his lack of effort.

If I were Jinwoo, I, too, wouldn’t join a guild.

Yup, trying to recruit Jinwoo was a lost cause... But there were many ways to maintain a working relationship without recruiting him.

It was time to execute plan B.

Just then...

Vrrr...

His cell phone vibrated once, indicating the arrival of a text message. President Baek distractedly fished his phone out from his pocket.

It was a notice from the association announcing the final list of hunters going on the ant-extermination mission in four days.

He scrolled past the Japanese names to check the list of Korean hunters. His eyes bulged, and he sprang up from the bench he was sitting on.

“There’s no Jinwoo Sung!”

* * *

The story went viral.

South Korea and Japan Join Hands to Exterminate Magic Beasts That Turned Jeju Island into a Wasteland!

What breaking story could capture the interest of Koreans more? The Korea-Japan alliance was front-page news and talked about on TV around the clock.

Yet only the Korean public seemed to be excited about this. Despite having triple the number of Japanese hunters assigned to go, the Japanese media was strangely quiet on the subject, though Korea didn’t pick up on the lack of coverage. Online reactions to the handful of articles written about it were negative as well.

↳What do you want us to do about Korea’s failure to close a gate?

↳Why do we have to clean up Korea’s mess?

↳They’ve already compensated us for any potential damage, right?

↳The Hunter’s Association of Japan is incompetent, and the Korean hunters are being fucking irresponsible. Hope they all die on Jeju LMAO.

The same mission but two very different objectives... The time to leave steadily drew closer as the two countries continued to regard the mission with different motives.

At the same time, those few days were the happiest of Jinwoo’s life since

before his mother's hospitalization. So many things had changed.

Firstly, Jinwoo had brought Kyunghye home after her discharge from the hospital.

Kerchak.

When they opened the apartment door, they were greeted by the huge mess Jinah had made in the living room while Jinwoo was inside the Demon's Castle.

“.....”

Jinwoo pinched Jinah's cheek as Kyunghye laughed and scolded him. To think the first thing she would do after four years was clean the apartment. Jinwoo had tried to stop her, but when she insisted, the children rolled up their sleeves as well.

Their faces glowed as the apartment itself began to shine. It had seemed empty without their mother, but now the place felt cozy.

Jinwoo slept comfortably without any worries for the first time in a long while. When he woke up the next morning and saw breakfast on the dining room table, it finally sank in that his mother was home.

Kyunghye, who was chopping green onions in the kitchen, turned to look at him.

“Did you sleep well, son?”

He smiled at her, not quite fully awake yet.

“...Yes, I did.”

* * *

An expert on TV was shedding light on the situation.

“The magic-beast ants are evolving at an incredible rate.”

An overly animated guest seated next to the expert asked a question.

“Magic beasts can evolve? Wasn't the ant that was discovered in Japan just a mutation?”

“You're right. When the mutants multiply and dominate the whole group, we call that evolution.”

A video clip flashed on-screen, showing a look at the ants recorded during the first and the second extermination missions. When they had first appeared, they'd crawled on the ground like ordinary ants. They were, in essence, just gigantic ants.

But soon after...

"This is footage of the ants from the third mission."

The ants were walking upright on two feet just like humans. Their huge heads were smaller, they were more agile, and they could use the remaining four of their feet like hands.

They were almost like half-human, half-ant hybrids. The species had gone through extensive changes within two years.

"And this is the magic beast that caused huge damage in Japan."

Whoaaa!

The audience was collectively unable to contain their shock at what they saw.

The ant somehow looked even more human and also had large wings sprouting from its back to boot.

A startled comedian on the panel blurted out, "And that thing can fly?"

"That's correct. This was also the catalyst for the Korea-Japan alliance."

The Korea-Japan alliance. Jinwoo quietly turned off the TV at those words.

Truthfully, he wanted to join the extermination mission. When President Go had asked him, his heart had fluttered at the thought of increasing his level, but...

His excitement had dissipated quickly, allowing him to assess his current situation objectively.

It hasn't even been a day since Mom woke up.

Nor had he told her that her only son had become a hunter, and Jinwoo still remembered the sleepless months she'd endured when his father had gone missing inside a gate. Given those memories, Jinwoo didn't think he could bear to tell his mother that he was going to Jeju Island.

He couldn't bring himself to say yes. He wanted to stay with his family for a few days at least. His wish had finally come true, and he wasn't about to cast it aside for some other affair.

"I..."

Jinwoo had reached a decision with much difficulty and forced out the words.

"...can't go."

This was more important than experience points. This was the sole reason he'd worked so hard to get stronger. He had no regrets regarding his choice.

The thing was...

↳But why isn't Jinwoo Sung's name on the Korean list?

↳He might be an S rank now, but people don't change that fast. Once an E rank, always an E rank. I bet he peed himself and ran off scared LOL

↳All twenty-one Japanese S-rank hunters + even a retired Korean hunter...but no Jinwoo Sung?

↳He's really gonna be like that after becoming an S rank? So humiliating T_T

It annoyed Jinwoo that a segment of the general public was criticizing him without knowing the full situation. Or rather, he was mindful of it stressing out his sister.

I personally don't care what other people say, and Mom is fine, since she doesn't use the Internet.

But Jinah seemed to keep an eye on this kind of thing.

Hmm...

Jinwoo bit his lip and put down his phone. There was nothing he could do for now. Kyunghye had gone to bed early, and Jinah wouldn't be home for a while.

Jinwoo was mulling over whether to go for a walk to take his mind off the whole thing when his phone rang. The caller ID brought a smile to his face.

Beep!

“Boss! It’s me, Jinho!”

“Hey.”

Speaking of, was Jinho still staying in a motel?

“Have you found a place? Or are you still at that motel?”

“Oh, no, I got my own place recently. Thankfully, my mother contacted me, so...”

Listening to Jinho’s laugh for the first time in a while felt strangely comforting. Jinho rambled on about how he was doing before abruptly remembering the reason for his call.

“By the way, boss, I’ve found an office space. Can you come check it out?”

What was he talking about?

“Office?”

At Jinwoo’s quizzical response, Jinho confidently replied.

“For our guild headquarters, of course! We need an office space in order to form a guild, boss.”

This kid... As future vice president, Jinho seemed to have huge ambitions of creating a guild to rival the Hunters or White Tiger Guilds.

Jinwoo scratched his chin.

He’ll be shocked when I tell him I’ll continue to be the lone raid member in the guild.

Jinwoo had casually asked Jinho to join him, but now that the time had come to explain his vision for the guild, he was at a loss for words.

* * *

“So what do you think, boss?”

Jinwoo understood why Jinho had sounded so self-assured when talking about this space. He nodded as he looked around the office.

It was in a good location.

“I picked the best space I could find in the vicinity of your apartment.”

It was clean.

“I purposely got us a new place, too. New wine should be poured into new wineskins after all, right?”

Finally, it was absurdly spacious.

.....

“I’m going to cultivate a guild that trumps the top five, boss!”

Jinho was on fire with determination.

I get that he’s excited, but I wish he’d leave me out of it...

Jinwoo silently debated whether it was too late to tell Jinho to go back to Yoojin Guild. Though he supposed it was unlikely that Chairman Yoo would take his son back after cutting him off.

Jinho looked shocked that Jinwoo seemingly had to think about it.

“Boss...? Do you not like this place?”

“...That’s not it.”

“Then may I sign the lease, boss?”

“...Sure.”

Judging from the size of the space, rent would be expensive, but it would still be only a fraction of the guild’s income.

I guess it’s okay to let Jinho dream for a bit.

Jinwoo couldn’t bring himself to tell Jinho that they’d be the only two people using this huge office.

“Oh!” Jinho clapped his hands. “Who are you going to pick as the last person, boss?”

“Last person?”

Had Jinwoo promised him they’d hire someone else? Jinwoo was puzzled, since he normally didn’t forget his promises, so Jinho enthusiastically explained.

“When you form a guild, you need a minimum of three hunters, boss.”

A president, a vice president, and at least one employee—were those three members the minimum number required to start a guild? Considering how a minimum of three squad members was required to tackle an E-rank gate, that made sense.

Although, no guild would bother raiding E-rank gates...

Founding members... Jinwoo mentally went through his various acquaintances for a potential third. The only condition was that they had to be a hunter, preferably someone who had no intention of working as a hunter and was just there to help fill the quota.

How come I can only think of women...?

The faces of the high school girl who'd given up on becoming a hunter and the healer who had moved back to Busan flashed through his mind.

At that moment...

“Oh, right!” exclaimed Jinho.

“You have someone in mind?” asked Jinwoo.

“No, that’s not it, boss. Someone was asking for you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, boss.”

Jinwoo’s interest was piqued. Someone had investigated deep enough into his affairs to know that he could be indirectly contacted through Jinho.

We’re not affiliated as far as the public knows.

If anything, the only known association they had was as a strike squad leader and member. Yet someone had expressly gone through Jinho to reach Jinwoo?

Jinwoo narrowed his eyes.

“Who’s looking for me?”

“I don’t actually know, boss. Some foreigner who spoke English... Hold on a sec.”

Jinho patted his pockets and took out his wallet, from which he produced a note.

“He said he’d be in Korea until the seventeenth, so he really wanted you to call on him, boss.”

The note contained only a cell phone number and a hotel room number. Jinwoo turned over the piece of paper, but there was nothing on the back.

The seventeenth is in three days...

A foreigner who spoke English... Who could that be? Nobody came to mind.

Suddenly...

“I need to head back.”

Jinwoo’s face was grim.

“What? Going home so soon, boss?” Jinho, who’d been looking forward to having a team dinner with Jinwoo for the first time in a while, looked like a kicked puppy.

Unfortunately for him, Jinwoo wouldn’t budge.

“I’ll be off.”

Jinho quickly hid his disappointment and gave his usual sharp bow.

“See you, b... Boss?”

By the time he raised his head, Jinwoo was already gone.

* * *

It was that time of day when every alleyway was blanketed in darkness. Jimin Eun, a university student, was on her way home as her heart beat wildly.

No way...

A man was following her. She hoped they just happened to be headed in the same direction.

I saw something about this online.

This kind of situation seemed to trouble both women and men. Men tended to have a similar or faster gait than women, but trying to overtake a woman

could frighten her as his footsteps approached. Meanwhile, trailing behind a woman would inevitably garner suspicions. Plus, walking down a creepy, dark alley with a blinking streetlight situated around the corner was enough to make both parties uncomfortable.

Jimin glanced over her shoulder.

A man wearing a hat was walking quietly behind her with his head hung low. He looked suspicious, but owning a hat wasn't a crime. Instead of continuing in disconcertedly with an unwanted escort, Jimin decided to take the initiative... She stopped walking and pretended to tie her shoelaces. The man promptly passed her and walked ahead.

"Whew..."

She breathed a sigh of relief as she watched the man round the corner and disappear from her sight. She closed her eyes and clapped her hands together as if in prayer.

I'm sorry I ever suspected you, guy whose name I'll never know.

She glanced around as she straightened out her clothes. She then smiled and resumed her course with a spring in her step.

She had so many assignments due! Even if she ran home, she wouldn't have time to get everything done. And she had to study for a final exam on top of everything.

What chapters were on the test again?

Jimin's shoulders drooped at the prospect of having to study all night, but as she turned the corner, her eyes went wide.

"If you scream, you're dead."

The man who had passed her by was waiting for her, now holding a kitchen knife, madness clearly reflected in his eyes.

"Several women have died here...but you already knew that, didn't you?"

"Oh..."

She was frozen to the spot, blood draining from her face. She couldn't scream

even if she wanted to.

The man took off his white mask and smirked at her.

“Follow me.”

Zzt, zzt...

They were completely alone, with only a flickering streetlamp as a witness.

“Ohhh... H-help...”

Jimin forced out the words as she backed away—or tried to, but her ankles felt like they had weights tied to them. All she could do was sob.

The serial killer inspected his surroundings. The girl was clearly too shaken to run, so he figured he’d kill her where she stood. Luckily, no one else was around, and he highly doubted this alley had surveillance cameras.

That’s why I like this neighborhood so much.

He gave a sinister grin as he thrust the knife at Jimin’s stomach.

But at that moment...a hand shot out of the darkness and grabbed the weapon.

“Huh?”

He turned his head to see a well-built man standing there. The hood of the man’s sweater was up, shrouding everything but his chin in shadows.

Is he...wearing gloves or something?

The hooded man was gripping the knife by the blade, but there was no blood.

“Who the hell are you?”

The killer tried to tug the knife back a few times, but it wouldn’t budge. He decided to let it go and hurriedly sprinted off.

“What a freak...”

The killer looked over his shoulder several times. The strange man was still following him while surveying his surroundings.

What the hell...?

The serial killer changed directions and lured his pursuer to the empty lot where he'd been planning to drag his victim. If the freak was wearing some kind of protective gear for his hands, the killer just had to aim elsewhere.

When they were close, the serial killer slowed to allow his hooded pursuer to catch up, and right as he was a single step behind...

"You're getting on my nerves, you bastard." The serial killer spun around, producing a hidden ice pick and stabbing the other man in the chest. "Were you looking down on me?"

Shnk!

The killer's hand gripping the pick trembled.

...Why is his chest so solid?

Was it some kind of protective vest? Or did he have something else under his clothes?

The serial killer spat out, "The fuck? Do you have something under your shirt?"

Had he possessed the ability to detect mana, he wouldn't have asked such a redundant question, but even after a couple of failed attacks, the possibility that he was dealing with a hunter still hadn't crossed his mind.

A low voice came from under the hood.

"I'm curious about something."

It was Jinwoo's voice. He threw aside the knife he had confiscated earlier.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Why? Are you gonna give me a sermon?"

"I'm just curious if you have some kind of reason."

The serial killer sneered. Jinwoo had appeared out of nowhere and kept following him even after rescuing the woman, so he'd assumed Jinwoo was trying to be some kind of hero, but...

This guy's a nutjob, isn't he?

The serial killer thought Jinwoo might be of a similar vein as he was. Maybe he could change the outcome if he could successfully convince the other man.

“Reason? Well, if I had to say...because it’s fun.”

“Fun?”

“It’s strange, but when I see those weaker than I am, I have this intense desire to mess with—”

...them. He wasn’t able to finish his sentence.

“Arrrgh! Ahhh!”

He collapsed to the ground and grabbed his left ankle where a ligament had been severed. When he looked up, the kitchen knife had somehow returned to Jinwoo’s hand.

When did he have time to pick it back up...?

Just then, Jinwoo’s form faded away again.

“Arrrrgh!”

This time, it was the right ankle. The serial killer writhed on the ground, unable to move with both ankle ligaments severed. Jinwoo searched through the killer’s pockets and fished out his wallet and cell phone.

“You... What the fuck is with you, you bastard?!”

Jinwoo ignored his victim’s snarls, called for an ambulance, and checked the ID in the wallet before depositing everything back in the shaking man’s hands.

“Give yourself up by midnight tomorrow.”

“What?”

“You know, if you want to live.”

Jinwoo had said all he wanted to. He proceeded to deposit one of his shadow soldiers into the serial killer’s shadow and relayed the same orders to him.

I don’t know how much patience a high orc shadow soldier has, but...

High orcs weren’t the best at waiting, but the second set of instructions catered to their expertise.

“Personally, I hope you survive.”

He’d need to be alive if he was to reflect on his crimes for years to come.

“S-seriously...who are you?”

Jinwoo leisurely strolled out of the park, leaving the serial killer trembling in pain and fear behind him. In the distance, he could hear the siren of an ambulance.

Once he was some distance away, he checked for others before lowering his hood.

“Whew...”

He’d arrived at the scene just in time, thanks to the shadow soldier who had successfully tracked down the serial killer and alerted Jinwoo.

Shadow Exchange... The more he used the skill, the more Jinwoo realized how convenient it was.

It’s definitely reflective of a skill from a rune stone of the highest caliber for sure.

The few times he’d used Shadow Exchange had left him satisfied without fail. He couldn’t even begin to imagine how much more useful it would be at a higher level with a shorter cooldown period.

Later, on his way home...

Huh?

He looked up to see the moon high in the sky.

Come to think of it...that’s tomorrow, isn’t it?

It was nearly showtime for the Korea-Japan alliance to undertake their mission. Jinwoo wasn’t part of the team, yet his heart was racing. How would the members of the actual raid be feeling?

He thought about the few S-rank hunters he was acquainted with and hoped for their safe return.

* * *

In the dead of night, Ryuji was in the training hall of the Hunter’s Association

of Japan. He was surrounded by two S-rank hunters in front of him and one behind.

Ryuji took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

“Hyah!”

The three hunters who had been waiting for an opportunity charged fiercely toward him. However...

Thud!

The opposing three fell to the ground.

“Good job!”

“Great work, Mr. Goto!”

“We’re no match for you.”

The three hunters brushed themselves off and got back on their feet, a feat possible only because Ryuji had been holding back.

Ryuji wordlessly nodded his thanks.

Like I thought, I’m in good form.

If he had to evaluate himself, he’d say he was in perfect condition. He felt an adrenaline boost every time he thought about conquering Korea.

So why...? After the others left, Ryuji stared into space, thinking back on that particular day.

Jinwoo Sung. Just who was that man?

.....

The more he recalled, the more bitter he felt. He shook his head to clear it.

Well, it doesn’t matter.

Jinwoo wouldn’t be attending the raid, and President Matsumoto’s plan would proceed without any setbacks. When Korea lost all their S-rank hunters on this mission, they’d have no choice but to hand leadership over to Japan. The Japanese people were demanding proper compensation from Korea right now, but they’d be cheering by then.

When the time came...

What would Jinwoo Sung alone be able to do?

Regardless of how strong he actually was or whether Ryuji had made a mistake, it boded well for Japan that Jinwoo wouldn't be attending tomorrow's raid. It meant that there wouldn't be any trouble.

Everything rested on tomorrow.

Ryuji smiled quietly to himself as he stood in the desolate moonlit gym.

* * *

"Thank you so much for doing this."

The executive director of the broadcasting company feverishly bowed to the cameraman.

It was quite a backward situation, but the man before him was no ordinary cameraman. He was a licensed A-rank hunter.

"Everything is riding on this for our network."

The company had spent half its annual budget for the broadcasting rights due to the high number of competitors. However, they'd made such a bold decision for a reason.

Only a handful of S-rank gates opened worldwide, and even when an S-rank gate appeared, it was impossible to bring recording equipment inside to film. In other words, this was the first and last opportunity for ordinary people to witness an S-rank raid unless, of course, another dungeon break tragically occurred at an S-rank gate elsewhere sometime soon.

What's more, the broadcast was going to be streamed live with a ten-minute delay. What kind of ratings would that bring—70 percent? 80? It was an excellent investment considering the revenue from selling the foreign rights alone.

As long as the raid doesn't fail...!

No audience would want to see their top hunters get eaten by magic beasts, nor would the broadcasting company want to air the footage. The director was betting everything on this fourth extermination mission, so lowering his head to

the cameraman who would provide this valuable footage meant little to his ego. Had the man asked, the director would've gladly kneeled.

"Don't worry too much, sir."

The cameraman put the director at ease. The camera had been his livelihood before his awakening, and he'd thoroughly done his research after accepting this particular job. He had absolutely zero intentions of ruining the stream for all his fellow Koreans watching. Besides, he would be receiving a hefty compensation.

I can't believe I'm getting royalties from the broadcast.

He already made a good living as an A-rank hunter, but the amount was enough to galvanize him. Plus, if things went as planned, he could have fame and fortune equivalent to the S-rank hunters on this mission. He would be the most famous A-rank hunter in Korea.

The cameraman smiled at his daydreams.

"Out of curiosity, how did you get President Go to agree to filming the mission? I'm sure it wasn't about the money, since he's so by the book."

The director nodded. "Yes, President Go said he would divide the money we paid among the participating hunters."

"Then why...?"

Why would President Go allow the mission to be filmed? The director could only hazard a guess.

"I think...it's because President Go wants to comfort the people."

The Hunter's Association of Korea had already failed three times against the ants. As a result, Koreans had lost faith in the association and had felt helpless against these seemingly indestructible monsters.

This was an opportunity to change the narrative.

It's clear what the public opinion of this entire affair is if you look online.

And President Go wanted to take it a step further and memorialize the precise moment of victory on film. This decision reflected his hardened

determination to prevent any more failures.

The cameraman agreed with the director's explanation. His expression turned grim as he checked his wristwatch and stood.

"It's already time. I'll be off."

The director gave him one last deep bow.

"Godspeed, sir!"

* * *

Tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp!

The helicopter transporting the hunters lifted off.

"....."

"....."

Even the cheerful Dongwook, the ever-confident Jongin, and the optimistic Yoonho sat with solemn expressions.

The cameraman ran a final inspection on his filming equipment, which consisted of a head-mounted camera for ease of movement.

I would never have accepted this mission if the camera was going to hinder me in any way.

The helicopter was headed to the most dangerous place in Korea—and quite possibly the world. The cameraman gulped at the thought. Despite his efforts to stay calm, he was slowly but surely growing nervous.

He wasn't the only one.

Yoonho struck up a conversation with his close friend in an effort to shake off the nerves.

"Hey, Byunggu, I didn't expect you to come."

Byunggu grinned. "I'm here because I thought you'd be the first to die without a healer. You leap at magic beasts without a second thought as soon as they come into view."

"Why do you have to say it like that? Since when have I ever leaped at magic

beasts?”

The other S-rank hunters laughed quietly at the exchange.

Byunggu was the lone S-rank healer in Korea. Everyone had been immensely relieved to hear that the retiree would be joining the raid. Having a healer in their ranks would make a huge difference—namely, they could fight without worrying about injuries.

As Yoonho and Byunggu’s conversation cut through the heavy atmosphere, Haein turned to Yoonho.

“President Baek, did you meet with Jinwoo by any chance?”

“Jinwoo?”

“Yes.”

Yoonho shook his head. “Nope. Why do you ask?”

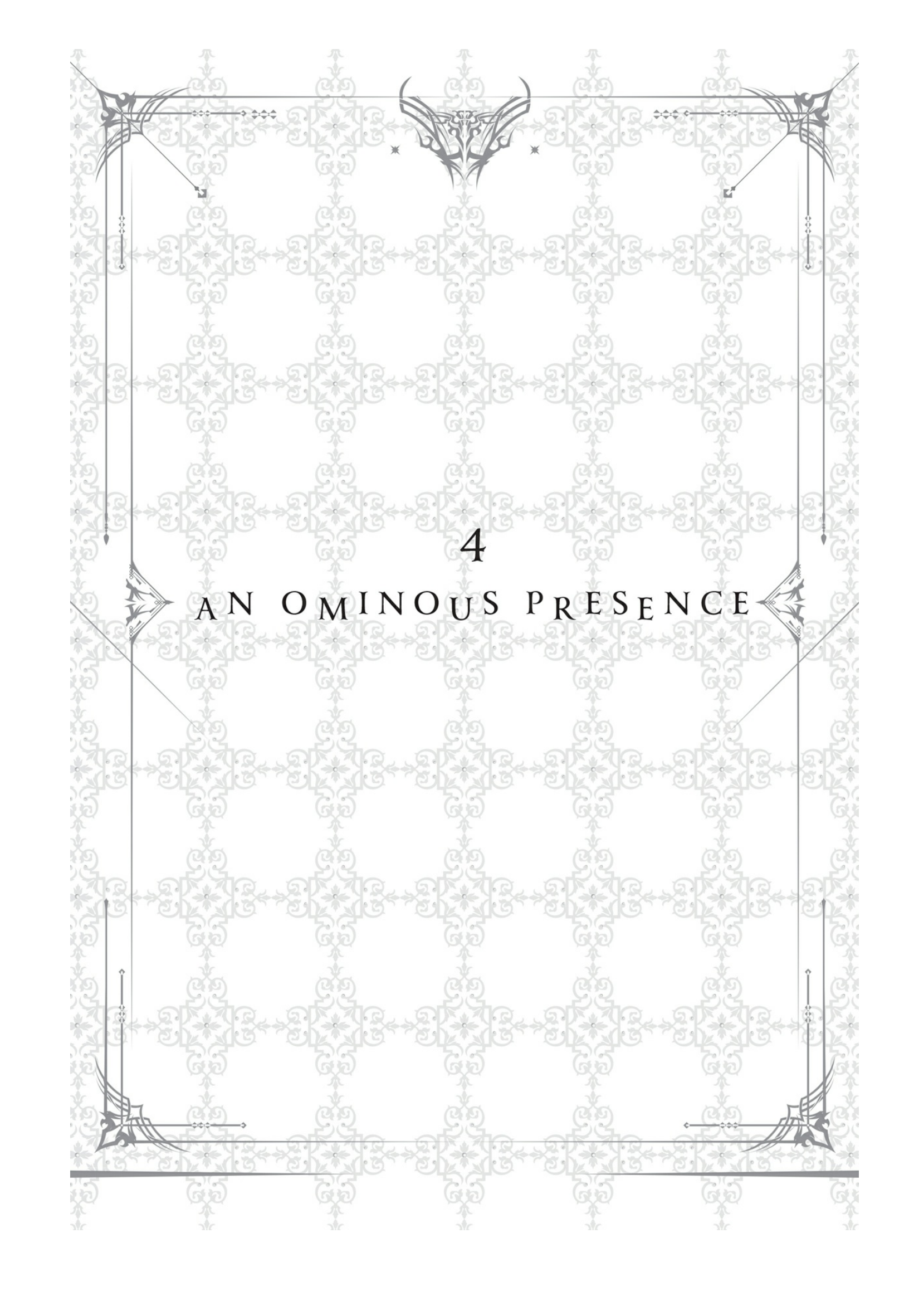
“Oh... No, it’s nothing. I must have misunderstood something.”

Just then, Dongwook guffawed.

“Oh-ho. It’s showtime.”

The hunters’ eyes all turned to what the bigger man was gesturing at.

The blackened ground that had been claimed by magic beasts slowly came into view through the helicopter’s windows.



4

AN OMINOUS PRESENCE



4

AN OMINOUS PRESENCE

The mutant ants spotted the approaching helicopter and shot up into the sky.

Vwoom...

Vwoom...

It appeared as though the ability to fly was a relatively new trait, so the hunters counted only around seven in total.

“I’ll take care of them.”

Jongin, the lone mage hunter on the team, cast his special ability, Flame Spear. Seven blasts of fire shot off like javelins that left a fiery trail. They struck the ants dead-on.

KABOOM!

It would be difficult to kill a magic-beast ant with a fire-powered strike that dispersed, but torching their wings was another matter.

SKREE!

SKRAW!

Jongin pumped his fists victoriously as he watched the ants plummet to the ground.

But there was no room to celebrate.

Jongin turned to Dongwook. “What’s the status of the Japanese teams?”

The ants had discovered them and were starting to mobilize. There was no time to waste.

Krakl...

Dongwook focused on the chatter coming through his earpiece. The tank had taken up the role of leading the Korean strike squad.

“They’re going in now.”

BANG!

As if on cue, there was a frightening explosion.

KABOOM!

BOOM!

The signal given, continuous explosions erupted across the island, generating huge plumes of smoke. This marked the start of the fourth extermination mission.

Taegyu Lim, the guild master of the Reapers Guild, frowned as he looked out the window.

Several thousand ants were emerging from the cave. They separated into four groups heading to the east, west, north, and south sides of the island.

“Seriously, they’re really creepy.”

“It looks like that’s all of them, right?”

“...Seems so.”

The long trail of ants soon ended, leaving a large hole in the ground—the entrance to the ants’ cave. Based on just the size of the entrance, which was as large as a highway tunnel, the interior cavern had to be huge. The queen could most likely be found in the deepest part of the cave.

The strike squad had only one goal: kill the queen.

“Everyone.”

Dongwook gestured for the team to gather around, waving the hesitating cameraman over as well. They formed a huddle.

“After several hundred simulations, the Japanese hunters determined they can buy us an hour. So we have that long to eliminate the queen by any means

necessary.”

He didn’t mention what would happen if they failed. Unlike the past extermination attempts, there was no way to abandon this operation. Deserters would find themselves stranded among the ants.

As Dongwook looked each member in the eye, they all nodded back, determined.

These are the best teammates I could’ve hoped for.

This kind of team would never assemble again unless another tragedy occurred. Dongwook considered it an honor to be their leader. After giving everyone a moment to steel themselves...

“Let’s go.”

Seven hunters—the six strike squad members plus the cameraman—jumped out of the helicopter.

* * *

“How long has it been since the Koreans went in?” asked Ryuji.

“Hold on, please.”

As team leader, Ryuji was supposed to be in charge of communications with the command center, but since he hated having his movement hampered, he’d assigned that duty to someone else.

“It’s been a little less than ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes...”

Ryuji decided it was about time to start their retreat. He briefly looked around to check whether they were okay to do so.

There were mounds of slaughtered ants. On the surface, the Japanese team’s purpose was to distract the enemy. Their objective was to buy time for the Koreans, so instead of outright killing the magic beasts, they’d employed a hit-and-run strategy. Despite all this, the body count was still quite high.

These ants may be a challenge for the Koreans, but not for us.

A confident grin spread across his face. Ryuji kicked an ant carcass out of his

way before he commanded his team to prepare to withdraw.

It was time for the next step in Japan's master plan.

But before he could...

"Uh, Mr. Goto?"

"Yes?"

The hunter in charge of communications had a grave look on his face.

"Command says they haven't heard from Team Three in a while."

Is their equipment malfunctioning...?

It wasn't unheard of for equipment to work perfectly during field exercises only to fail right before or during an actual mission.

Team 3 had been deployed on the south side. Ryuji's Team 1 had touched down on the west side and moved south, so they should be relatively close.

"How far are we from Team Three's last-known location?"

"Command says we should get there in ten minutes at our current speed."

As per Ryuji's calculations, they weren't that far. There would be dire consequences if they fell back without Team 3 and left them on the island.

.....

Japan couldn't afford to leave five S-rank hunters behind if they were considering an all-Japanese extermination mission down the line—especially not Team 3, which consisted of some of their best. There was a reason they'd been assigned the location closest to the entrance of the ant cave. It would be a huge blow to Japan if they lost any hunters from that group.

I'm sure they're fine...

Ryuji assumed there had simply been a small miscalculation. He considered it for a second before giving the order.

"Let's go find them."

* * *

Tak.

As soon as Jinwoo came to a stop, a familiar chime rang.

Ping!

[Total distance run: 10 km]

[You have completed running 10 km.]

Unlike that first time he'd done the daily quest, Jinwoo wasn't winded at all. He'd been doing this every day for so long that it had become a part of his routine.

Soon, the quest completion awards were delivered, along with the usual notification.

Stats.

He invested two of the three ability points in agility and the last one in strength.

[Stats]

Strength:	219
Stamina:	200
Agility:	230
Intelligence:	250
Perception:	200

(Available ability points: 0)

Physical damage reduced by: 46 percent

Jinwoo smiled in satisfaction as he watched most of his stats go up to a number ending in zero.

If only I had one more point...

It was unfortunate, but it wasn't like he could make points appear out of thin air. Still, he couldn't stop smiling as he looked at his relatively even stats.

Nice.

Jinwoo had been increasing his stats across the board once the intelligence stat had reached 250.

Each one of these is invaluable.

He'd come to this conclusion a while ago. A stat raised to a high enough value would always be of some use to him, no matter the situation.

So...

Unless he had a reason to do otherwise, Jinwoo would continue spreading out his ability points evenly and maintain balanced stats.

He closed the window contentedly, then looked around. The neighborhood was relatively quiet anyway, but today, one could hear a pin drop.

He could easily guess why. Jinwoo took out his phone and checked the time.

I knew it.

The Korea-Japan allied raid was in progress. Everyone in Korea was probably glued to their screens.

Jinwoo headed off. Though he'd completed the daily quest already, his footsteps were still quicker than usual on his way home.

* * *

The mission was going smoothly. Just like Japan had outlined in their plan, Dongwook's team met no resistance as they went farther into the tunnels. The inside had a similar structure to other cave-type dungeons. The only difference was that hunters had to light their own way due to the lack of glowing stones.

.....

Gulp.

Despite having plenty of experience being in dungeons, the cameraman couldn't help feeling nervous. He made up the very back of the group.

Jongin, who had a flame lit in his hand, led the other hunters, who stuck closely behind him. The cameraman also had a flashlight attached to his head for filming purposes, but because it was nowhere near as powerful as an S-rank hunter's magic, it was barely able to cut through the mana-laden darkness to

illuminate the space right in front of him.

“It’s quiet,” Jongin blurted out, and Dongwook nodded beside him.

“Mm.”

As a tank and as the leader, Dongwook had a duty to protect the mage at the forefront of the group. Perhaps that was why Dongwook continuously scanned their surroundings with keen eyes, his usual cheerfulness nowhere to be seen.

Yoonho was also acting differently than usual. He’d entered the ant cave with Eyes of a Beast activated and on the lookout for even the faintest trace of mana.

Byunggu and the cameraman were quite tense as well. Only Haein seemed unaffected as she walked in silence with her hand on her sword, wearing her face set in her default blank expression.

That was when...

“Over there...!” Jongin had discovered something.

“Oh.”

“Ah...”

The hunters gasped in shock.

Countless ant eggs covered the walls and ceiling for as far as the eye could see. Black larvae could be seen writhing within through translucent shells. The hunters felt only one emotion as they stood in the midst of this dreary, moldy-smelling spawning ground: disgust.

“Should I burn them all?” Jongin wrinkled his nose.

Dongwook laughed for the first time since they’d entered the ant cave.

“I’m dying to do that, but there’s no time.”

Even if every one of these eggs hatched, they would last only a year. They didn’t need to worry about these eggs as long as they eliminated their mother.

“They’re coming!” cried Yoonho, pointing into the darkness as a warning.

Haein had already drawn her sword. Dongwook lifted his shield, which was

almost as tall as he was, and stared ahead.

Tak-tak-tak-tak!

About ten worker ants appeared. Their vestigial eyes matched those of the others born on Jeju Island.

“Are they the queen’s guards?”

Jongin shook his head. “No, they seem to be guarding these eggs.”

“This shouldn’t be too hard, then.”

If these ants were regular magic beasts and not the queen’s guards, they wouldn’t last long against a squad of S-rank hunters. Dongwook knew very well that they didn’t have much time to spare, so he attacked the ants first.

“Gooo!”

The hunters charged at the ants. Fire flashed from Jongin’s fingertips, and the arrows shot by Taegyung sliced through the air.

As Dongwook had predicted, the battle ended quickly.

SKRAAAW!

The last ant’s head hit the ground, and Haein flicked some bodily fluids off her sword.

“All these eggs...,” mused Dongwook.

“Means the queen is nearby.” Jongin finished the tank’s thought.

The cameraman was walking around while everyone else readied themselves for a big battle when he suddenly cried out.

“Ewww!”

All the hunters stared at him.

“S-sorry.”

The flustered cameraman bowed in apology, momentarily forgetting that the whole country was watching through the camera on his head.

Curious, Yoonho approached him. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, it’s just that... Over there.” Giving an embarrassed laugh, the cameraman pointed to a corner. “The hatched eggs are piled up over there, but one of them is especially huge.”

.....!

Yoonho wasn’t sure what to make of the sight.

Most of the eggs were around the size of a bicycle wheel, but the egg the cameraman had pointed out was as big as a human...

No.

The egg was long and oval, and it was big enough that a fully grown ant could have come out of it.

This can’t also be an ant egg, can it?

“What the hell came out of this?” Byunggu had come to stand next to Yoonho, and his surprise was also clear on his face.

Yoonho’s expression had been dark, but he promptly smiled and patted Byunggu on the back. “We just have to get rid of the queen, so don’t worry about anything else.”

“...Right.” Byunggu turned to rejoin the others with an uneasy look on his face.

Yoonho glanced back at the egg one last time.

This doesn’t make any sense...

* * *

This doesn’t make any sense...

Ryuji could not believe his eyes.

“Ack!”

“Gah...!”

The other hunters of Team 1 swallowed hard and flinched at the sight. Ryuji grimaced as he looked around.

The hunters of Team 3 were exactly where they had lost communication—

except they were all missing their heads. It was a shocking discovery, to say the least. Five colleagues were lying dead on the ground.

.....

Ryuji massaged his temples as he thoroughly inspected the bodies.

Their heads weren't cut off by a blade.

No, they'd been ripped from their necks.

How much force would it take for something to bite their heads off like this?

Ryuji stared, astonished, as another seething hunter spat out, "Those damn ants..."

Ryuji shook his head. "It wasn't the ants."

"What?"

"Whatever it was, there was only one."

"N-no way?!"

Ryuji swallowed hard.

There was no evidence of a struggle. If Team 3 had been wiped out by the ant swarms, there should have been ant corpses or some signs of struggle, but he couldn't find anything like that. Then there were the dead hunters' wounds. Based on the location, this had most likely been done by the same creature.

How could a single magic beast kill the most elite hunters of Japan...?

There was only one explanation: It was the work of an S-rank dungeon boss.

Ryuji grabbed the communicator from the other hunter on his team and spoke forcefully.

"It's Goto."

"Yes, please continue."

"Where's the queen? Did she leave the cave?"

"We'll verify her location."

The Japanese team had access to a satellite equipped with a camera that

could detect mana. Only the United States, Japan, and China had this kind of technology, though the Chinese had hacked and copied it from the Americans, so it'd be correct to say that the equipment had originated from the United States and Japan.

They could determine the queen ant's location using the satellite they boasted so much about. Said location was communicated through the receiver.

"No, sir. The queen has been in her den the whole time. Oh, the Korean hunters are entering it now."

"What?" Ryuji sprang to his feet, his heart sinking.

This wasn't done by the queen?

He began to hyperventilate. Something was going horribly wrong.

He hastily said, "Give the withdrawal order... Tell every Japanese hunter to leave the island as quickly as possible."

"Copy that."

Ryuji ended the communication. His expression was grave.

Did we miss something?

They'd considered solutions to every single thing that could possibly go wrong in order to guarantee a successful mission. However, they hadn't foreseen five of Japan's best hunters getting annihilated.

Wait a second.....

Something suddenly occurred to him. There had been a strange phenomenon four months ago. They had been monitoring the queen ant around the clock when there was a sudden and significant drop in her magic power. It had dropped to less than half her usual amount.

The research team had hypothesized that this had to do with the queen's life span and had optimistically forecasted her demise several times. But she had slowly recovered.

It took about a month, didn't it?

She'd soon regained her mana, and the researchers had had no explanation

for the unexpected turn of events.

“Mr. Goto.”

Ryuji was pulled out of his thoughts by a fellow team member.

“Mm.”

He was still on one knee from inspecting the remains of Team 3, so he slowly rose to his feet. This wasn't the time to get distracted.

Have we come too far inland...?

Tak-tak-tak-tak!

Hundreds of ants had gathered behind them, smacking their lips at the prospect of food.

* * *

Meanwhile, the Korean team entered the queen's den, the boss's lair of this particular place. It had taken them fifteen minutes to arrive.

If it takes us the same amount of time to get back...

That left them thirty minutes to work with. If they assumed getting out would be faster than coming in, since they now knew the way, they had plenty of time.

Good.

Dongwook nodded as he checked his wristwatch.

Everything was going smoothly. The important thing now was to determine how to complete the mission.

Yoonho made out the exact number of enemies lying in wait by using Eyes of a Beast.

“The queen is at the very back. There are eight guards in front of her.”

The queen's guards were incomparably stronger than regular ants. It would be a tall order for Dongwook to take on the queen and her guards on his own. He needed another tank as support. He looked to one side.

“Hunter Cha.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Will you please take on the guards while I deal with the queen?”

“Leave it to me.” Haein kept her reply short.

She had been the main tank on Hunters Guild raids, so being a support tank would be a piece of cake.

Dongwook looked around at his team members. Each and every one of them was an expert in hunting magic beasts, so it would be a waste of time to go into a detailed explanation.

“Let’s begin.”

As soon as Dongwook turned to face the ants, Jongin created a huge glowing ball and floated it to the highest point of the ceiling, lighting up the entire room.

“Wow.” The cameraman quietly marveled at the enormous size of the ball. He whispered quickly into the small microphone next to his lips.

“I’ve been on quite a few raids as an A-rank hunter, but this is the first time I’ve seen light magic this impressive. As expected of the best mage hunter in Korea.”

His voice was broadcast to viewers around the country.

The cameraman was informed over his earpiece that the viewer ratings for the stream had surpassed 80 percent. Feeling ambitious, he stepped forward to get better footage, but Byunggu grabbed him by the shoulder from behind.

“Argh!”

The powerful grip compelled the cameraman to turn around. His mouth gaped like a fish because of the pain in his shoulder.

How is a healer this strong...?

Before he could say anything, he took in Byunggu’s demeanor, which was completely different from when they had been joking around in the helicopter.

“There’s an S-rank dungeon boss in here. No one will be watching out for you.”

The cameraman was rendered speechless as Byunggu snapped at him, and the cameraman could only nod.

“If you get what I’m saying, stay behind me. The real battle starts now.”

The force of an S-rank hunter was truly something to behold. Despite healers being known as the weakest among all hunter types when it came to combat, Byunggu’s energy overwhelmed the cameraman. It illustrated the difference between an S rank and an A rank.

This was a clash of titans, so what place did he have on this battleground? Feeling helpless for the first time since becoming a hunter, he scurried behind Byunggu.

“Here she comes.”

A gigantic ant slowly crawled on her six legs toward the party.

“That’s the queen...”

Yoonho swallowed hard. It was plain to see that the other hunters were also apprehensive.

She truly had a majestic presence! After sneaking past an army of thousands, they were the first-ever hunters to lay eyes on the queen.

It’s the end of the line for these godforsaken ants.

Yoonho’s heart raced at the thought of bringing down something so massive. But in order to do so... His eyes finally drifted down.

Gotta take care of them first...

Eight ants marched in front of the queen—her guards. The hunters would have to start with them.

“Hyah!” As if he’d read Yoonho’s mind, Dongwook, the main tank of the team, sprinted to the front line. A thick vein bulged on his neck as he roared out. “Come at me, ants!”

Although their eyesight was weak, the guards were sensitive to sound. Baring their mandibles and claws, they rushed at Dongwook.

Dongwook looked over his shoulder.

“Hunter Cha, now!”

Haein had been following behind Dongwook at a distance, and she now pulled

her sword out of its sheath. Gripping it with both hands, she plunged it into the ground and activated her special skill, Provocation Vibration.

Vwoom!

Waves of magic power radiated from the sword, and the guards lunging at Dongwook were suddenly compelled to turn on Haein as if possessed.

Perfect!

Dongwook exclaimed to himself as he watched the guards pass him and charge at Haein instead. Haein had successfully put them in a state of Aggro.

It was now Dongwook's turn. He blocked the path of the queen as she, too, lumbered toward Haein.

"You're mine."

The queen roared loudly, displeased with the enemy blocking her way.

SKREEEEE!

The average tank wouldn't have been able to stand the pressure of the terrifying roar and would've blocked their ears to protect themselves, but it was a useless trick against Dongwook, the best tank in Korea.

"Haaaaah!"

He activated his own skill, Spirited Provocation. While Haein's skill affected a wide area, Dongwook's skill targeted a single enemy.

The screeching queen glared at him; his skill had done its job.

Yes!

His aim was to endure the boss's attacks until his colleagues killed the guards and joined him. He was now in his element.

Dongwook's eyes were steely as he raised his heavy shield right up to his chin. And as he did before all his battles, he offered up a silent prayer.

Please give me the strength to protect myself and my colleagues.

KABOOOOM!

With many lives hanging in the balance, the assassination attempt of the

queen began with a literal bang.

* * *

“The hunters are on TV, dear. Aren’t you going to watch?”

“Don’t care.”

“Don’t be like that... The people on TV said that the hunters have a really great chance of defeating the ants this time, so let’s watch it together.”

“Hmph. Those idiots always say the same thing. I said, I don’t care.”

The elderly man turned his back on his wife and continued reading his newspaper. Soon, a tutting sound came from the hunched back.

“Tsk. Even this damn newspaper is all about hunters, so there’s nothing to read.”

At her husband’s grouching, the elderly woman cautiously closed the door to their bedroom.

“Haah...”

Until two years ago, her husband had religiously followed news stories about Jeju Island and had even cheered on the hunters.

They’d lost their one and only child to the ants. The deep despair they’d felt when their world collapsed had turned into a great rage against magic beasts.

Her husband had supported the hunters by donating money to the Hunter’s Association every time there was another extermination mission. The night before each operation, he was a sleepless bundle of nerves. However, the greater his expectations, the deeper his disappointment. When the third mission involving the full force of the association also failed, the light in his eyes faded, and he wasn’t himself for a time.

Ever since then, he’d stopped talking about hunters. The elderly man had let go of all expectations and hope.

“Haah...” The elderly woman sighed once again and picked up the remote for the living room TV. She turned it on, and the emotional voice of the show host blasted out.

“The hunters, the pride of Korea, have taken the first steps to confront the queen ant.”

She'd tuned in right when the battle was about to begin. The elderly woman clasped her hands to her heart and watched nervously. She looked away whenever hunters got hurt and clapped excitedly when their attacks landed.

“Oh my! Oh my!”

“Oh! Oh! Finally! They defeated the first magic beast!”

That was just the beginning. Thanks to the hunters' joint efforts, the ants fell one after another. Each time one collapsed, the entire apartment building seemed to quake from the tenants cheering and applauding.

“Oh dear, oh dear!”

“Four! There are only four left! They've already taken down half!”

Her eyes stung with sudden tears. She felt an overwhelming gratitude for the hunters risking their lives to protect their people as well as grief at the memory of her son, who had been over the moon about landing a job at a huge company on Jeju Island.

“There are only two guards left! Once the hunters defeat just two more guards, they can attack the queen. Victory is within reach!”

Just then...

Slam!

The door to the bedroom flung open, and the elderly man rushed out.

“Dear...”

The old man didn't respond to his wife's calls, staring at the TV screen with red eyes. His clenched fists trembled.

The host continued to monitor the raid situation with bated breath.

“The hunters have defeated every one of the queen's powerful guards! Only the queen is left! Once they kill her, all other ants can be eradicated! The hunters are attacking the queen without wasting any time!”

Dongwook had successfully preoccupied the queen. The other five hunters

sprinted out from behind him, and as they did...

Tears were already streaming down the old man's face as he thrust both fists in the air and shouted.

"Rahhhhh!"

* * *

At the TV station, the executive director cried out joyously as phones rang off the hook. Words of encouragement were pouring in from all over the country.

"Sir, our ratings just went over eighty-five percent!"

"We did it!" He clenched both his fists tightly.

Of the overall audience, 85 percent would be a record that wouldn't be broken even if the Korean soccer team somehow made it to the World Cup finals. And when he considered the revenue they'd already generated and would generate from overseas markets...

Cha-ching!

The director scrubbed his face with both hands as he plopped down in his chair. The other employees in the control room exhaled in relief as they saw how the director couldn't hide his elation.

The stream showed the Korean hunters soundly thrashing the queen.

"The United States, China, Russia, and France! South Korea is about to be added to the list of countries that have cleared an S-rank dungeon!"

The director wiped the sweat beading on his forehead with his handkerchief.

Excellent, excellent!

The queen was on the brink of death, and all that was left was for the hunters to get out of the ant cave safely after defeating her.

However...

SKRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

"Whoa!" Shocked, the director turned as a producer rushed to turn down the volume. The director approached him, perturbed.

“Producer Na, what was that sound?”

“Um, it’s...raw footage transmitting from Jeju Island. I think that sound came from the queen ant.”

“From the queen?”

The TV broadcast was on a delay, as due to the unpredictability of the raid, it would be too risky to broadcast in real time.

The director looked up from the footage with a grin.

“Nobody wants to hear a magic beast screaming during this historical moment of victory. Why don’t you edit it out or decrease the volume?”

“Yes, sir.” Producer Na nodded, and the director patted their right shoulder in encouragement.

Just then, another employee rushed in with a severe expression.

“Sir! Producer Na!”

The director turned. From his experience, someone who looked like that during an operation such as this wasn’t there to report good news. He was struck by an ominous feeling even before he heard the report. He desperately hoped his gut was wrong for once.

“...What’s going on?”

The thing was, his gut was rarely wrong. The employee sounded perplexed.

“The Japanese hunters seem to be leaving Jeju Island right now!”

“What?!”

* * *

Dongwook yelled out encouragements. “We got this! Keep going!”

The queen was about to collapse, so they just had to push forward a little harder. Taegyu’s arrows sprouted from the queen’s head, making her look like a porcupine.

Ffffttt!

Shhhk!

Another arrow flew and hit the queen square in the forehead. She screamed and shook her head in pain.

SKREEEE!

The queen soon snapped back to her senses and spewed poisonous acid all over the den.

Fshhhhhh!

The attack had such a wide range that the hunters couldn't avoid getting sprayed, but fortunately, Byunggu was there to heal their blackened skin.

SKREEEE!

The queen was enraged that her poison was ineffective. She proceeded to bite down on Dongwook's torso with her gigantic sawlike mandibles.

Crunch!

However, he had also protected himself with an Advanced Reinforcement skill, so he was able to endure the queen's bite. He used his shield to block one mandible while his left hand pushed the other side back. As he bought time, a huge ball of flame struck the queen in the side.

KABOOM!

It was Jongin's magic.

KRAAA!

As the queen attempted to regain her footing, Yoonho, who had transformed into an animal-type magic beast, leaped onto her back and ripped out one mandible with his bare hands.

Krrrk!

He gently landed on the ground and panted. Yoonho was certain of one thing.

The queen is done.

Experience told him it was about time for the boss of the creatures that had stained the land with the blood of too many victims to sleep for eternity.

They were so close. As that thought entered his mind, powerful emotions

surfaced from deep inside him.

But just then, before they could stop her, the queen reared her head up toward the sky and...

SKRAAAH!

An ear-piercing screech echoed throughout the whole cave.

Yoonho's eyes twitched.

What was that? A roar? A final cry?

No, this sound was different. The high-pitched noise was more like a desperate call for help to something far away.

She's calling for someone?

The thought brought chills to his spine.

"Shut her up!"

As Yoonho was about to make his move, Haein gracefully jumped through the air and swung her sword as hard as she could.

Shhhk!

The queen's head landed on the ground before Haein herself.

Thud!

The cameraman had been holding his breath throughout the entire battle. Now, he raised both hands up high with tears in his eyes.

The four-year ordeal had finally come to an end.

"Huff, huff!"

Dongwook panted as he gave his teammates a big thumbs-up. Haein exhaled a sigh of relief. Jongin gave a big smile while adjusting his glasses. Taegyung pumped both his fists in victory. They each expressed their joy in their own way.

However, Yoonho was trembling as an inexplicably ominous feeling rose from the pit of his stomach.

"Hey, we just became the seventh team in the whole world to clear an S-rank gate. So why do you look—?"

“Hold on.”

Right then...Dongwook, who had been talking with Command, looked up with a stunned and angry expression. There was no time to waste. He yelled urgently at his resting teammates.

“All the ants are headed this way because the Japanese hunters left the island. We need to evacuate now!”

“What?”

“I thought we had a lot of time left!”

“Never mind an hour, twenty S-rank hunters couldn’t even last thirty minutes?”

Dongwook responded bitterly to his panicked teammates. “We don’t know what happened... The association is trying to get answers, but Japan has cut off communications.”

“Those sons of bitches...,” Jongin spat out.

Would the Japanese hunters have given up on them so easily if they were fellow countrymen instead of Korean? Whatever the case, they’d have plenty of time to be mad at Japan once they got out of here alive.

Dongwook contained his emotions as best he could in order to keep his teammates from freaking out. He pushed everyone toward the exit as calmly as possible.

“Move!”

The whole team hurried out the way they’d come.

However...Yoonho halted suddenly at the front of the group.

“Ah.....”

“Yoonho?” Byunggu stopped abruptly right behind him, causing a chain reaction with the rest.

Yoonho began trembling as he stared at one spot.

“N-no way...”

This couldn't be happening. No, this *shouldn't* be happening.

As he watched a shadow draw closer, he remembered the human-size egg he'd seen in the nursery.

Th-this power from a single magic beast?

Yoonho's face grew pale. The other hunters backed away from the entrance as they realized something was very wrong.

"What's going on?"

"Are the ants back already?"

The other hunters were confused.

An ant with wings slowly emerged from the darkness before them. Something struck Haein as strange as she watched the magic-beast ant enter the den.

I...can't sense its presence...?

If it wasn't for her eyes, she'd have difficulty sensing it at all. Among all the hunters and magic beasts she'd ever encountered, she'd only ever met two like this: this magic-beast ant in front of her and...

Jinwoo.

Haein recalled how, only a few days ago, Jinwoo had shown a glimpse of his true power while sparring with Ryuji. What if Jinwoo had turned against them and had come in after them? She felt suffocated, and a chill ran down her spine. Even imagining it made her freeze.

.....

The Korean team was tired from battling the queen, and the appearance of an unknown ant was not welcome news.

"That thing..."

"There's something weird about it, isn't there?"

"I'm getting chills."

Although unable to detect what was scaring Yoonho and Haein, the others could sense that something was strange.

Gulp!

Even though it was only one magic beast, the air around them had changed dramatically.

How should we proceed?

Dongwook debated what to do. When encountering an unexpected situation, it was up to the leader to make a decision quickly, especially in moments like this when there was no time to waste.

A magic beast has appeared, so all we need to do is get rid of it, but...

But...why did he feel so uneasy?

While he was still debating this, the magic-beast ant had almost reached them. Its movements were eerily quiet.

There's no time to hesitate!

But by the time Dongwook had decided to ignore his instincts and make a more logical decision...the beast had vanished.

"Where...?"

Dongwook's eyes went wide as he looked for the beast. The other hunters did the same.

"Behind...!" the cameraman yelled as soon as he located the creature. "Behind you!"

The hunters whipped around, shaken. The magic-beast ant had moved so quickly that the hunters had been unable to track it until the thing was already standing in front of the queen.

It got by us?

How...?

The other hunters were starting to pick up on what Yoonho had already seen with Eyes of a Beast.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

Their hearts raced, and their breathing got heavier.

...This isn't any ordinary beast.

Cold sweat appeared on Dongwook's forehead.

The ant showed zero interest in the Korean hunters but instead stared at the dead queen. It raised its head up high...

SKRAAAAAAAW!

...and let out a terrible roar loud enough to shake the entire cave.

Whump!

The cameraman's legs were the first to buckle.

Whump!

Whump!

Hunters dropped to their knees one after another, unable to stand the pressure. Dongwook gripped the ground in disbelief.

I—I can't believe a scream brought me to my knees!

SKRAAAAAW!

When the ant's relentless cry finally ended, the only person still standing was Haein, but even her legs were shaking and about to give out. A counterattack was but a pipe dream.

The magic-beast ant finally turned its attention to the hunters. Extreme hostility emanated from it.

.....!

Haein's eyes widened.

The beast's face looked horrifically distorted, as if enraged by the queen's death.

Haein calmly moved her fingers to the hilt of her sword...but the ant made its move faster than Haein could draw.

Zoom...

The magic-beast ant disappeared from sight and reappeared right in front of her nose.

Haein flinched. She didn't even have time to think about defending herself.

Ka-pow!

"Argh!" A blow to the side of her head sent Haein flying into a wall, where she fell to the ground.

Whud!

Seeing Haein get knocked out by a single punch shocked her colleagues. To think their strongest member would be down for the count with one hit...

However, there was no time to be surprised. The hunters had just witnessed how strong their enemy was, so they knew very well that their chances for survival would diminish the longer they hesitated.

Dongwook the tank made the first move.

"Graaaaah!"

He bear-hugged the ant from behind, focusing all his energy into both arms. He squeezed the ant's body with enough power to pull a huge, thick tree out of the ground, roots and all. The veins on his neck and arms bulged.

But...

"Ahhhh!"

The magic-beast ant flexed its body, and both Dongwook's arms fell to the ground, severed. The now-armless Dongwook dropped to his knees.

"No!" Yoonho sprang forward.

Had Yoonho not distracted the beast, the defenseless Dongwook would've lost his life right then and there.

Yoonho gritted his teeth. White fur emerged all over his body, and his nails lengthened and grew sharp. The transformed man bounded toward the ant like an animal.

Whoosh...

The magic beast disappeared again.

Where...?

It was impossible to follow the ant's movements even with his Eyes of a Beast ability.

A scream came from behind him.

"Arghhh!"

It was Jongin, who'd been casting a spell. The ant slashed at the man's torso with its claws, and the mage fell to the ground with a moan.

Taegyu, who was situated about five paces from Jongin, had hidden his presence while waiting for an opportunity to attack. He now shot an arrow imbued with mana at the ant.

There's no way I'll miss from this distance!

He confidently watched the arrow fly.

Ffft!

But...

Tak.

Taegyu was incredulous.

How?!

The ant had snatched the arrow out of the air and broke it in half.

Crack!

Taegyu tried to fire again, but the beast was already standing right in front of him by the time he nocked another arrow and raised his bow.

"...Shit."

Pow!

Taegyu was punched in the face and flew back.

As soon as the ant turned its back on Yoonho, the hunter lunged at him. But the beast reacted instantly, grabbing Yoonho's skull and smashing his face into the ground.

Crunk!

Yoonho's body twitched. When the ant tried to pound his face into the rock once more, Dongwook charged at the beast shoulder-first.

Bam!

The magic-beast ant tumbled to the ground but was soon back on its feet. Dongwook's missing arms had regenerated, and the tank tackled it, his body back in prime condition.

The ant struck Dongwook down. It defeated the other hunters again and again. But the wounded hunters recovered quickly and leaped back into the fray. The ant came to realize that there was a healer present and started searching the area.

Byunggu remained calm. He had one self-defense skill: Camouflage. Similar to Stealth, it concealed his presence, but the one drawback was that he had to keep still. Despite that, it was a valuable skill for a healer. It allowed him to stand in one spot and focus on reviving the others.

The magic beast changed its tactic as it sensed healing magic coming from a hidden source. It grabbed Dongwook, the sturdiest of the hunters, by the legs and held him upside down in the air.

What the hell is it doing?

Byunggu was unnerved by the change.

The ant slowly began breaking Dongwook's bones. As it did, Byunggu poured his healing magic into the tank. He had no other choice. Dongwook would die if Byunggu stopped. He sweated profusely as he continued casting.

The ant's gaze suddenly zeroed in on Byunggu's location.

It can't be...

Byunggu's heart sank. When he blinked, the ant had vanished.

Huh?

Where had it gone?

"Byunggu!" Yoonho cried out.

At that moment...

Shunk!

“Gaaaah!”

Blood spurted out of Byunggu’s mouth. Feeling like he’d been set on fire, Byunggu looked down and saw a huge hole in his stomach. Protruding through said hole was the black arm of the ant.

Byunggu raised his head and met Yoonho’s eyes. He called out, “Yoonho... run.”

“Byunggu!” Yoonho tried to stand, but his left leg was wounded and wouldn’t support his weight.

Crunch!

The ant bit off Byunggu’s head.

Crunch! Crunch!

“Noooooooo!”

Yoonho hobbled toward them. The ant abandoned Byunggu’s headless body and grabbed Yoonho by the neck. The hunter struggled to escape the beast’s powerful grip, but it was no good.

The magic-beast ant opened its mouth.

“Yoonho...run... Yoonho...run.”

“.....?” Yoonho was taken aback.

The beast was emitting a perfect replica of Byunggu’s voice. It sounded just like him, save for some strange cracks.

“Run...Yoonho.”

The ant repeated the words over and over until it finally looked Yoonho straight in the eyes.

“You are...weak.”

What came out of the magic beast’s mouth was a familiar language. Though a little stilted, it was clearly Korean.

“How.....?” Yoonho’s eyes widened.

“Our queen...was killed... I killed your soldiers, but...it’s not enough... Who is your king?”

“...King?”

The ant tightened its grip on Yoonho’s neck.

“Guh...!”

“Where is...your king?”

Yoonho’s mind raced. Haein was the strongest among the Korean hunters, but she was out cold. He tried to think of someone who could buy them some time. The Japanese team that had abandoned them sprang to mind. Among them, Yoonho thought of Ryuji, the strongest of that bunch.

“Out...side.”

“Outside...”

The ant lifted its head as if searching for something. After a while, it spoke in a satisfied voice.

“...There is...a strong one.”

The beast dropped Yoonho like a sack of rocks, as if he were a waste of time and effort. It then disappeared in a flash.

“Cough, cough!”

Yoonho tried to catch his breath, then took stock of the situation.

There was no time. They had to escape from this place before the beast returned.

However...

Tak-tak-tak-tak!

While the hunters had battled the formidable beast, the army of ants had made their way back to the nest and were now pouring into the queen’s den.

* * *

“Hmm.”

Ryuji sheathed his sword in its scabbard. There were mounds of ant corpses

around him, numbering over a hundred. The power of Japan's strongest hunter had been on full display.

"It looks like the coast is clear."

"Yes, sir."

Having witnessed Ryuji's performance, his teammates nodded. It seemed they were invincible as long as they had him by their side.

"Everyone else has left, so it's just us now."

A hunter relayed the messages coming from the command center. Ryuji nodded and turned toward the coast.

"This wa—"

But Ryuji was unable to finish his sentence.

Vwoom!

A magic-beast ant suddenly appeared before his very eyes.

.....

Ryuji took in the enemy's capabilities at once.

This is no ordinary ant.

"Mr. Goto!"

Ryuji stopped his colleagues from trying to help him.

"I'll take care of this."

With an enemy this powerful, his subordinates would only get in his way. It was better to handle this on his own. His teammates stepped back as he commanded, putting their full trust in him.

Ryuji carefully drew his sword.

"Ant...you have quite a presence."

The ant didn't budge, as if it'd sensed Ryuji's power and was now frozen to the spot. Of course, had it moved, Ryuji would've sliced it into a hundred pieces.

The ant opened its mouth.

“You’re...the king?”

“King?”

Ryuji was startled. He couldn’t believe he had actually heard an ant speak. It was a known fact, though, that intelligent magic beasts had their own language, so it didn’t seem too far-fetched for them to be able to mimic human language.

Ryuji smirked.

King.....

When President Matsumoto established an empire of hunters, Ryuji would be the only one with the right to sit on the throne.

“Yeah, I’m the king.”

Kree...

As soon as the ant got the answer it’d been looking for, it unleashed its full magic power.

Fwoom!

Ryuji had severely underestimated the beast. His eyes bulged from his head.

What in the world...?

The sudden drop in temperature gave him goose bumps and made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He had experienced this kind of sensation once before.

...Jinwoo Sung?

Shunk!

Ryuji’s head fell to the ground as soon as the magic-beast ant made its move.

* * *

“Arghhh!”

The Korean team was overwhelmed by ants. Dongwook, Taegyu, Jongin, and even the cameraman fought off the swarm, but there seemed no end to the continuous wave.

Huff, huff, huff!

Yoonho could hear only his own labored breathing.

Is this the end?

He wiped some blood from his brow with the back of his hand. With their only healer gone, they had no chance against this many magic beasts. Anything he did would be futile resistance. Even so, Yoonho couldn't bring himself to give up. He'd already lost two dear friends in this cursed land, and he refused to also lose his life here.

"Raaaah!" Yoonho crushed another ant's head, but several more took its place.

Skraaa!

Skraaa!

He forcefully shook off the ants and stood with his back to the wall to avoid getting attacked from behind.

"Huff, huff!"

Yoonho's eyes searched for a glimpse of the other hunters. They'd been fighting side by side a little while ago, but all he could see now was a sea of ants.

He refused to believe it, but...

As Yoonho worried his lower lip, he flinched when he suddenly felt a presence appear behind him. He spun around, ready to throw a punch, but faltered when he realized it wasn't an ant.

What's this?

It was a soldier dressed in black armor. Although Yoonho had never laid eyes on one himself, Heejin Park had told him countless times about encountering such a creature during the red gate incident.

That has to be...?

Yoonho yelled in surprise. "What's it doing here?"

Just then...he heard a familiar voice coming from the soldier.

"Exchange."



5

KING OF THE ANTS



5

KING OF THE ANTS

About a year before the Korea-Japan alliance arrived on Jeju Island, the Ant Queen had a thought.

We must leave this island behind.

It was now nearly impossible to find prey, so her children frequently resorted to eating one another. By the time the population of the ant colony had hit several thousand, there was not enough food to sustain all the subjects of her queendom.

We cannot go on like this.

If the ants' first mission had been to conquer this island, then their second mission was to leave and find someplace teeming with life to build a new empire.

However, the queen recalled the powerful intruders who had encroached on the island a few times. Although the queen's army had been able to defeat them, her subjects had sustained great damage as well. So many of her children had sacrificed their lives during those battles. Would they be able to fight them off in another land as well?

I need a more formidable soldier.

Her subjects required a mighty soldier to lead them. Thus, she decided on the direction of her species' evolution.

About half a year later, the queen birthed said soldier; it was born from a combination of her mana and the plentiful nutrients she had consumed. She created a dangerous killing machine designed specifically to deal with the

formidable humans. Using her resolve to create a powerful soldier and the prime directive to kill all humans, she manufactured a monstrosity.

Her beastly child was born with a skill called Predation, which gave it the ability to absorb part of an opponent's magic power and knowledge by consuming them.

I want to get stronger.

The beast even preyed on its own kind once it realized its true capabilities, and the queen let it happen, because what it wanted and what she wanted were one and the same.

The queen was delighted as it got stronger with each passing day. As its strength surpassed that of the queen, she steadily prepared the new soldiers it would lead.

Almost there...

However, in the middle of the process, intruders arrived on the island once again. They were smaller in number but much stronger than the previous parties.

The queen had to smile, though. It was the perfect opportunity to test her creation's power before waging war on humans in another land. The queen sent it along with the other soldiers to protect her queendom.

It completed the task she'd given it. However, it returned to find the queen dead.

It was furious. Fortunately, there were still many humans left on the island at which to target its rage.

The first to fall was the human king. The monstrous beast made quick work of all its subordinates as well. That was when one of them yelled something at it as he sobbed before finally being killed.

What are you?

The Predation skill allowed the beast to absorb the critical thinking abilities of the humans it consumed, so it pondered the question.

What am I?

It had simply been one of the queen's soldiers until then, but what was it now that the queen was dead? It was the only being capable of leading the soldiers of this empire.

It knew only one word fit to call someone in that role.

...King.

Having eliminated the king of his enemies, the monstrous beast believed he was qualified to be a king.

Crunch.

The Ant King bit off the head of the last human standing. But then...

He suddenly gazed in the direction of his castle. An enormous amount of energy was emanating from the queen's final resting place like an oncoming storm. It wasn't the kind of power a mere soldier could possess.

...Another king?

The beast slowly rose and moved toward his castle, instinctively realizing that a threat had arrived.

* * *

It was a bolt out of the blue. The mood in the control room of the TV station switched from that of a party to a funeral.

The broadcast of the raid had been going smoothly up until the appearance of the ant with wings. They were flooded with calls voicing complaints and concern as soon as they hastily shut down the stream.

Riiing!

Riiing!

An employee cautiously walked over to the executive director and reported, "Sir, I was told that our phone lines are about to break down from so many viewers calling in."

The director looked up. "So what? Do you expect me to show them that damn ant ripping hunters apart?"

"N-no, sir."

The broadcast had been cut just when the magic-beast ant began single-handedly destroying the hunters. Naturally, the audience was desperate to find out what was happening, but the network couldn't exactly broadcast Hunter Ma being tortured or Hunter Min being eaten.

The director moaned while burying his face in his hands.

"It's over... It's all over."

This had been an all-or-nothing gamble with the network's fate hanging in the balance, and it had come crumbling down because of a single ant.

"Over..."

There was a heavy silence in the room. No one dared to open their mouth... except one person.

"Huh?" A producer had been somberly monitoring the incoming feed. "S-sir!"

"...What?"

"Someone else just appeared on the scene."

The director responded without moving. "Unless Jesus Christ himself shows up, I don't want to hear it."

"But...!"

"It's all over."

Realizing the director wouldn't listen to anything he had to say, the producer turned the volume up as high as it would go.

SKRAAAH!

SKREE!

The air filled with screams from the ants. The director finally raised his head in shock, and he wasn't the only one. Every employee in the control room rushed closer to the main monitor. Exclamations tumbled out of their mouths.

"....."

The dazed director finally lifted himself out of his chair. The crowd of employees parted to let him through. The contents of the monitor were

reflected in his eyes.

“Dear God... Oh lord!”

The director invoked a god he didn't believe in, then started barking at his crew.

“Don't just stand there! Why aren't you airing this? Do you want to be held responsible for withholding this kind of footage from viewers?”

The director could barely contain his excitement, but the producer urgently brought him back down to earth.

“Sir! If we start broadcasting now, we have to go live. It'll air in real time without a second's delay. If an emergency comes up, we can't do anything about it!”

The ten-minute delay between the transmission they'd received and the broadcast they were airing had been used up when they'd halted the stream.

“...We're putting everything on the line.”

“Pardon?”

“We've already stopped the broadcast once, so we have nothing to lose anymore.”

“Th-that's true.”

Suddenly, an unknown hunter came into the camera's frame. They couldn't tell if the hunter was Korean or Japanese or whether he actually was a hunter, but they'd been granted a second chance at a gamble they thought they'd already lost.

The director solemnly gave the order.

“Air it. No matter what happens, just air it.”

He pulled out a chair and took a seat next to the producer.

“Our network's future is in that man's hands.”

* * *

“Arghhh!”

Even on the brink of death, the cameraman had no regrets.

Pretty much everybody dreamed of this, of becoming a hero. He would have even been happy being a hero's sidekick if he couldn't be the hero himself. When he'd been working the odd assignment for the network as a cameraman, he had never dreamed he'd get that opportunity.

But then he'd awakened as an A rank and gained experience as a hunter. And finally, he'd ended up on this raid. Because of that, he'd had the chance to capture the spectacle of Korea's representative hunters successfully taking down an S-rank boss on film.

I'm the one who did that.

This footage would let people know of the sacrifice made by the S-rank hunters in order to exterminate the ants. That was good enough for him. He felt like all his efforts as a cameraman and as a hunter had been rewarded.

He did have one regret, though.

Dad...

After his mother had died of cancer, his father had raised him as a single parent. The cameraman now felt a profound sadness at not being able to see his father ever again.

Crunch!

He didn't feel a thing as an ant bit down on his shoulder, as he'd already lost the use of his arm a while ago. He'd endured until now because of his natural resilience as a tank, but he was reaching his limit.

Thud.

He dropped to his knees. Even in this moment, his father was the only thing on his mind.

I can't believe the last conversation I had with him was whether he'd eaten dinner.

Had he known this would happen, he would've made more of an effort to speak with the old man. He wished he'd canceled his previous engagements and spent the day with him that time his father had visited Seoul. Alas, time had

flown by, and regret had come too late.

The cameraman looked up. The horrifying mandibles of the magic-beast ant descended toward his head. His mana reserves had dropped so low that he was unable to protect himself with Reinforcement.

Tears welled in his eyes.

Sorry, Dad.

But instead...

Krsh!

With the loud noise of a shell being cracked open, fluid splattered all over the cameraman's face.

"Huh?"

A silver blade had penetrated the ant's skull. The cameraman's eyes followed the length of the blade to land on another ant with some red plumage attached to its head.

An ant killed its fellow ant?

No, it wasn't an ant. He'd mistaken it for one because both figures were swathed in black. A mysterious warrior dressed in black armor withdrew their sword out from the ant's carcass.

Thud.

The ant fell lifelessly to the ground, and when the shadowy warrior stepped aside, a familiar man approached and yelled at him.

"Open your mouth."

"Pardon?"

Before he could process the request, the man forcefully grabbed the cameraman's chin and poured an unknown liquid into his mouth.

"Cough, cough!"

The cameraman swallowed all the liquid even as he choked on a bit of it. He covered his mouth with his hand as he asked, "Wh-who are you?"

The man didn't answer, turning toward the other ants instead.

Wh-what...?

Confused, the cameraman quickly got to his feet.

Wait a minute...

His legs were moving. And that wasn't all. He hadn't realized it immediately, but his arm had recovered as soon as he drank the liquid.

What's going on?

Had that man done something to him? There was no other explanation.

It was then that the cameraman abruptly recalled where he had seen that face.

No way. Could he be...?

* * *

Jinwoo calmly took stock of his surroundings.

.....

He was relieved he'd had the foresight to hide one of his soldiers in President Baek's shadow the day he met the Korean team members in the Hunter's Association gymnasium.

It appeared as though the TV broadcast hadn't been airing live, and the actual situation was much more serious. Jinwoo saved the cameraman first, since he was the weakest among the hunters here, but the S ranks were still surrounded by ants.

What should I do?

Fang could easily clear them with his fire breath, but Jinwoo couldn't guarantee the safety of the S-rank hunters. He needed another solution.

Jinwoo quickly made a decision and turned to the giant next to him.

"Iron!"

The soldier smacked his chest as if to say that he knew exactly what to do. Iron's heavy body lumbered forward. He puffed up his chest and gave a great

shout.

GROAAAAAAR!

Ping!

[Iron is using Skill: Epic Taunt.]

The effect was incredible. Every single ant in the vicinity quickly turned their attention to Iron and rushed him.

“Good job.”

Jinwoo patted Iron’s shoulder and summoned the two daggers he’d acquired after killing the Demon Monarch.

The Demon Monarch’s Daggers...

The daggers’ blades shone under the glare of Jongin’s light magic.

SKRAAAAAW!

SKREE!

A tidal wave of black filled Jinwoo’s vision as several hundred screaming ants simultaneously rushed him.

He gripped his daggers tightly and then disappeared from view.

SKRAAAA!

Soon, Jinwoo’s soldiers and the ants were locked in a fierce battle.

Meanwhile, Yoonho, who was in better shape than the others, hurriedly moved his fellow hunters to a safe corner. Thankfully, everyone was still breathing. The cameraman hastily lent him a hand.

The two men were able to safely finish their task because Jinwoo, or rather, Jinwoo’s minion, had lured the ants’ attention with an Aggro skill.

“Huff, huff, huff!”

Dongwook leaned against the wall to catch his breath and grabbed Yoonho’s arm.

“Wh-what’s going on? Who’s fighting now?”

His vision was blurry due to an injury to his eyes. Yoonho covered his hand with his own.

“Master Ma, it’s okay now. Everything will be fine.”

“.....”

Yoonho turned to watch Jinwoo. While the others were still unaware, Yoonho had a rough estimation of how powerful Jinwoo was. He couldn’t help but be alarmed when Jinwoo had suddenly appeared where the soldier in black armor had stood. Before he knew it, though, he’d yelled at Jinwoo for help.

As Jinwoo and his soldiers charged at the ants, Yoonho’s legs almost buckled in relief at the sight. As he expected, the ants that had been a real challenge for Yoonho and his teammates were quickly mowed down by Jinwoo as if they were toy soldiers.

SKRRRAAAA!

The screams coming every which way from the ants were quite nauseating.

Yoonho let out a sigh of relief.

Everything’s fine now.

He didn’t say this to Dongwook but thought to himself. Renewed hope for surviving this ordeal blossomed in his chest. He trusted in Jinwoo’s power more than he’d ever trusted the twenty-plus Japanese S-rank hunters.

...I guess there’s no place for me in this battle.

Yoonho settled down beside Dongwook with a smile. The only thing he could do currently was silently observe Jinwoo at work. He turned to the cameraman and gestured to Jinwoo.

“Please follow that man closely. You’ll witness something incredible.”

He had only heard about the red gate and the Hunters Guild incidents from others. This was his opportunity to see things unfold with his own eyes.

“Yes!” The cameraman kept his distance so as not to interrupt the battle and trained his camera on Jinwoo.

The strike squad’s job was done, but he still had work to do.

Gulp!

He swallowed hard.

SKRAW!

Jinwoo cleanly sliced an ant's body in two and looked around the area. He'd already dealt with about half the ants. He'd cut down a countless number of them without breaking a sweat. Truth be told, this was less of a challenge for him than the top floor of the Demon's Castle.

Should I speed things up a bit?

He inspected the black smoke coming off the ant corpses and gave an order.

"Arise!"

The cameraman's blood ran cold.

What's going on?

Something strange was happening. Wind was blowing through the underground cavern, which should've been impossible, and it sent a chill up his spine.

And also—

Right as he noticed the eerie silence that had settled over the area...

KREEEEE!

Black hands shot out from the ground as deep moans echoed through the space.

Tak.

Tak.

The hands slammed down firmly on the stone of the cavern and pulled their respective bodies up out of the shadows.

"Whoa!" The cameraman inadvertently gasped out loud. His eyes were wide, and he began to panic. Despite the things he'd seen as an A-rank hunter, he couldn't believe what he was witnessing, so how would the viewers at home react to this?

As he continued to stare aghast, the owners of the black hands fully emerged.

Magic-beast ants?

At a glance, the creatures looked just like the ants, save for the black smoke rising off their bodies. It was hard to tell if they were solid or made of gas. It was like someone had made magic-beast-ant models out of black dry ice.

Several hundred of these creatures emerged from the ground.

The cameraman's heart pounded, and he had trouble breathing. Yoonho also couldn't help but gasp at what he was witnessing. Though he was calmer than the cameraman, his mouth hung open, too.

Those... Those are all his minions?

Unlike the two men who were at a loss for words, Jinwoo regarded his additional soldiers with satisfaction.

Excellent.

Jinwoo's shadow soldiers now outnumbered the magic-beast ants.

I don't have to raise a finger anymore.

He returned the Demon Monarch's Daggers to his inventory and relayed his first order to his new recruits.

Don't leave a single enemy alive. Go.

SKRAAAAAAH!

Just as the ants had rushed into the den earlier, Jinwoo's shadow beasts swarmed toward them. The endless horde of ants was swept away by a sea of black.

* * *

Yaaay!

The control room of the TV station burst out in loud cheers.

The executive director leaped to his feet and clapped. "That's it! Yes!"

A weight lifted off his shoulders as he watched the refreshing sight of the ants getting wiped out. It was like ten years of indigestion had been instantly cured.

Had there been no one else around, he would've asked the producer to send him this video clip. He could've used the footage to de-stress for months and years to come.

It had been devastating to see Hunter Byunggu Min's tragic death. It had felt like the sky was about to come crashing down when the only healer on the team died at the hands of the magic beast. Still, if the remaining members could safely escape from the ants' cave with the help of the mysterious hunter...

That would be the best-case scenario!

The Korean team had already accomplished their main mission of assassinating the queen. Without a way to breed, the ants would soon vanish from the island.

And what about the Japanese team? Since they'd abandoned their mission, not only did Korea not have to fulfill their promise to Japan, but they had the right to hold them accountable later.

The cherry on top was that this footage could be sold for a mint.

The director's face was aglow.

Where did this lucky charm come from?

The director's eyes twinkled as he watched Jinwoo. That was when one of the crew members approached him.

"Sir!"

The startled director shot out of his chair.

"What now?"

The director's face hardened. Things had been going swimmingly, so what could've gone wrong this time? His heart was already racing. He was starting to intensely dislike the employees who reported things to him. If he could prevent bad news by simply forbidding them to speak, he would.

This is driving me crazy...

Unaware of his boss's thoughts, the employee's face glowed as he exclaimed, "That man, I found out who he is!"

The director's eyes grew wide.

"What?!"

* * *

Inside the president's office at the Hunter's Association...

Crack!

President Gunhee Go quickly let go of the couch armrest. The doctor seated next to him looked at him.

"President Go..."

"...I got a bit too excited."

He had unintentionally clenched his hand and crushed the armrest. But how could he not get worked up after seeing that footage? His emotions had welled up as he watched Jinwoo's performance on the sizable TV.

If his body had allowed it, he would've participated in the raid as well.

"Getting overexcited isn't good for your health."

Gunhee nodded.

There was only one reason why he, the president of the association, wasn't in the mission command room. Whether the operation was a success or a failure, the stress would've been too much for his heart. For that same reason, his doctor had elected to stay and monitor his condition, as even watching it unfold on TV was risky.

Should I have stopped President Go from watching the raid?

The worried doctor questioned his own judgment, but he shook his head as he took in his patient's expression. Ever since Hunter Sung had initially appeared, the president's smile hadn't left his face.

"It's Jinwoo!"

Gunhee's shout when the situation had switched from desperate to hopeful still rang in the doctor's ears.

Gunhee laughed.

I can't believe this.

He delicately gripped the armrest of the couch again. He needed something to ground himself, as his body was itching to join the fight.

How did Hunter Sung even get there?

Gunhee was rather curious about that. How was Jinwoo able to arrive on the island teeming with ants without anyone knowing? But that kind of thing wasn't important.

What was important was that Hunter Sung was there at all. Because he was, there was hope for the other hunters yet. Those two facts were all that mattered.

That was when...Gunhee stared in shock as he watched Jinwoo extract shadows from the corpses of the ants to create more soldiers.

That young man lied to me.

That wasn't just a hundred minions. Even based on a rough estimate, there were at least three hundred. Even so, Gunhee didn't look like someone betrayed. He wore a pleased grin on his face.

He said that he wanted to fight magic beasts.

Gunhee now understood Jinwoo's reasoning behind that statement. With such power, Jinwoo would be unafraid to face any magic beast. He actually seemed exhilarated, and anyone watching him would feel the same.

So why had Jinwoo declined the invitation to join the Korean team in the first place?

I guess he had something more important come up.

Gunhee firmly nodded. A man who looked like that when confronting magic beasts would've otherwise joined the raid team. Gunhee became lost in thought as he wondered what Jinwoo's reasons were for not participating.

* * *

Bang, bang!

Jinah, who had been studying in her room, went out to the living room at the

racket.

“Mom?”

“I’m sorry. That was too loud, right?”

Jinah shook her head. The volume had already been turned down to a point where it was barely audible so as to not disturb Jinah’s studies, so she didn’t want her mother to make more of a fuss.

“No, it’s okay, but what’s wrong? Is the TV broken?”

“It just stopped working.”

“Where’s Jinwoo?”

“He’s right here.” Her mother blinked in surprise. “Oh, where did your brother go? He was here a minute ago.”

Jinah shrugged and opened the door to Jinwoo’s room.

“Jinwoo?”

He wasn’t in the bathroom, either. After searching the whole apartment, Jinah turned to her mom.

“What were you two watching?”

“The Jeju Island raid.”

“.....”

Jinah felt a sudden uneasiness as she recalled that the rest of the apartment building had been rather noisy for a while now.

Could it be...?

She rushed back to her room and turned on her cell phone. As she did...

Yeaaaaaaah!

As intense cheers exploded from every corner of the building, Jinah froze in shock at what she was seeing on her phone screen.

“Jinwoo?”

As soon as he'd finished off the ants in the queen's den, Jinwoo sent his soldiers back to his shadow. Not all the ants that had been dispatched throughout the island had returned, so Jinwoo figured his priority should be getting the hunters to a safe location before they ran into more of the monsters.

Some of them are injured, after all.

He walked over to the raid team. With the exception of Yoonho and the cameraman, the rest seemed to be in pretty dire shape. Haein was still unconscious, and the other three hunters' injuries were definitely serious.

"Where's Hunter Min?" Jinwoo asked.

Yoonho shook his head with a mournful look on his face.

"....."

Jinwoo summoned healing potions to treat the hunters. He had to feed them the elixirs, since they lost any effect if he wasn't holding on to them.

"Mm..."

With each draught, another hunter recovered.

"Huh?" Taegyu blurted out as he sat and patted himself up and down.

"But..."

Jongin's and Dongwook's wounds were also healed.

"Hmm..."

"Cough!"

Jongin hadn't the faintest idea what was going on and blinked at Jinwoo in confusion.

"Hunter Sung? Why are you here?"

"Let's talk outside."

"Oh..." Jongin took in their location and nodded.

They were in the deepest part of the ant cave—not the best place to have a conversation.

“Master Sung!” Dongwook, whose eyesight had been restored, clasped Jinwoo’s hand firmly. “You were the one who fought those ants, weren’t you? Thank you. Thank you so much!”

Jinwoo responded to Dongwook in the same manner. “Let’s talk outside.”

“Understood.”

Haein was the last one. Jinwoo’s forehead wrinkled as he bent down in front of her.

That’s odd... Her life force is too weak.

He was filled with a sense of foreboding as he carefully poured the potion into Haein’s mouth. Sure enough, a message immediately popped up.

Ping!

[Healing potions cannot recover HP when it dips below 10 percent of your total HP.]

Jinwoo frowned. When he lowered her head back to the ground and pulled his hand away, he saw that it was covered in blood.

.....

That damn ant. The beast had given one of the most distinguished Korean hunters a life-threatening injury with a single blow. The other hunters had survived not through their own power but because the ant had been toying with them.

Jinwoo’s expression hardened.

But first...

Treating Haein’s wound was the most urgent priority. She needed to get off the island as soon as possible and see a healer, since potions weren’t having any effect.

“Let’s hurry.”

Jinwoo gathered Haein’s prone form in his arms and stood. The other hunters got to their feet as well. As he tried to hurriedly lead everyone out of the queen’s den, Jinwoo let out a long exhale.

.....

Yoonho understood why he did. Jinwoo passed Haein to the guild master, who took her with a flustered expression.

“I’ll help you.”

Jinwoo glanced at them all and firmly stated, “Please do not intervene. It’ll go faster that way.”

“Jinwoo, you mean—”

Jongin tried to say something despite not fully understanding the whole situation, but Dongwook shook his head and cut him off. Though the tank hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, he’d been able to sense what Jinwoo had done to the ants from start to finish.

Jinwoo was correct in this instance, but Yoonho was still worried.

“Hunter Sung.”

Jinwoo turned to him.

“I know how strong you are. There probably isn’t anyone who understands that better than me. However...” Yoonho’s expression was serious. “You’ve already summoned too many minions, haven’t you?”

Why would that be a problem? Jinwoo stared at Yoonho, uncomprehending. Flustered at the lack of reaction, Yoonho hurriedly explained.

“You’ve probably consumed a ton of mana already. What are you going to do if you run out?”

Jinwoo understood now. Guessing from what Yoonho was saying, other hunters who used summoning magic required a lot of magic power to cast their spells.

They don’t need to know that summoning my shadow soldiers doesn’t use up mana, do they?

His shadow soldiers clearly didn’t look like run-of-the-mill minions anyway. Jinwoo chose his words carefully.

“My minions don’t consume much magic power, so there’s no need to worry

about that.”

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Yoonho and the cameraman exclaimed at the same time.

Jinwoo didn’t need a ton of magic power to summon all those minions? Did this man have any weaknesses?

.....

Jinwoo looked toward the exit of the cave to avoid explaining things further just in time to see ants rushing inside.

So many of them.

They had an injured member, so there wasn’t any time to waste. Jinwoo activated Monarch’s Domain for the sake of efficiency. The ground beneath his feet started to turn an inky black.

But before he could summon his soldiers, an ominous wind blew in from the other side of the cave.

.....?

Jinwoo sought out the origin of this sinister energy.

It was one of the ants. Despite being similar in appearance to the others, this one clearly stood out from the pack.

It’s him.

Jinwoo instantly identified the Ant King. The Ant King also noticed Jinwoo and leisurely made his way over.

“Human... The energy is strong in you.”

He spoke in Ryuji’s voice.

Remembering the nightmare they had just endured, the other hunters backed away, but Jinwoo held his ground and quietly leveled a glare at the beast.

The Ant King stood in front of Jinwoo.

“Are you the king of the humans?”

“...To think a bug could talk.”

At Jinwoo’s mild response, the ant’s face twisted horribly.

Using the strength he’d inherited from the queen and the power he’d amassed from Predation, the Ant King combined all his magic power to make his body expand. He was originally the same height as Jinwoo but quickly grew to one and a half times his opponent’s size.

He roared as loudly as he could right in Jinwoo’s face.

SKRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

Jinwoo didn’t even blink. Instead, a grin spread across his face.

“You’re finally starting to resemble a bug.”

He then unleashed his own magic power.

* * *

“We lost communication with Goto?” President Matsumoto’s face was ashen.

His subordinate handed him a headset. “Would you like to listen?”

President Matsumoto snatched the headset and shoved it on. The employee played the recording for him.

“Ant...you have quite a presence.”

“You’re...the king?”

“King? Yeah, I’m the king.”

“Mr. Goto!”

“Argh! Ahhh!”

“Gah!”

“U-ugh...”

“Wh-what are you?!”

Beep.

“We lost contact after that.”

President Matsumoto was stunned as he removed the headset. From the

occasional creepy noises and the bone-chilling sounds from the magic beast, he could draw only one conclusion.

The ant can speak like a human? And it killed off Goto?

This wasn't part of the plan. Their plotting and preparation had been perfect, so how...? His hands began to tremble ever so slightly.

"...Sir?"

President Matsumoto quietly hid his hands once he realized his subordinate was watching, and he changed the subject.

"Where is the magic beast that ki—that could talk?"

He couldn't bring himself to call it the magic beast that had killed Ryuji.

"It disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

The beast had been powerful enough to kill Ryuji, so how was it possible to lose track of it with their mana-detecting camera?

The employee pointed at the monitor as if anticipating this very query.

"That light represents the magic beast's mana."

The camera registered magic power as light. The bigger and brighter the white spot was on the monitor, the more powerful the source. Once Ryuji's and the Japanese hunters' lights blinked out, the biggest, brightest spot also vanished.

"Oh no...," President Matsumoto groaned.

The enemy had excellent control over its own magic power.

That's why... Because it could...

This was why the research team had failed to notice it.

It was their complete loss. Japan had paid the price by losing ten of their highest-ranking hunters, including their strongest. It was an incredibly high cost for a single mistake, especially considering the potential aftermath awaiting them.

What if that horrible magic beast crosses the ocean...?

President Matsumoto couldn't exorcise the dark thoughts from his head.

But at that moment...

"Found it! It's revealed itself!"

President Matsumoto's eyes shot open.

"Where is it?"

"It's in the queen's den."

"....."

That was where the Korean hunters were fighting off the returning hordes. They were hanging on for now, but the new creature was beyond anyone's imagination.

I suppose they're done for.

That's what President Matsumoto thought, but he stared as something caught his eye.

.....?

Another light had suddenly blinked into existence in front of the horrifying beast.

"Wh-what's that?!"

Shocked, President Matsumoto looked at the member of the research team, who vigorously shook their head.

"I-I've never seen such a huge signal before."

It seemed to be on par with, or possibly bigger and brighter than, the magic beast's. But more shocking were the several hundred tiny sparks surrounding it.

The head analyst of the research team, someone who'd inspected surveillance videos as a living for many years, had never seen anything like this.

Oh.....

They couldn't help but marvel as the smaller lights repeatedly split off from and joined with the larger one. However, President Matsumoto didn't have

time to be impressed.

“The Korean team is filming the raid, aren’t they?”

Since the Korean team was still alive and kicking, the broadcast was most likely still going. President Matsumoto was dying to know what was happening.

“The Korean broadcast! Pull the Korean broadcast up on the main screen!”

Instantly, the image of a man facing off against an ant appeared on the giant monitor President Matsumoto had indicated. He swallowed hard as he took in the fellow’s face. A bead of sweat dripped down from his temple and clung to his chin.

That man... Is he the one controlling all those lights?

In front of this newcomer was a magic beast much larger than the average ant. President Matsumoto’s heart raced as he felt the ant’s overwhelming presence through the screen.

.....

He was stunned.

Just then, the ant made the first move.

* * *

The Ant King struck Jinwoo in the face.

Pow!

It was a strong enough blow to nearly bend Jinwoo backward, but he held out by digging into the ground with his heels.

.....!

The ant had put his full force behind that punch, but the human had taken it without a problem.

“You withstood...my power?”

The ant had been aiming to kill, but his attempt had merely pushed Jinwoo’s head to the side. However, there was no time to be surprised as Jinwoo threw a punch of his own.

Whoosh...

Ka-pow!

It connected with the ant's face dead-on and slammed him into the wall.

Bam!

The wall caved in like a meteor had struck it. For a brief moment, the whole cavern shook from the impact.

"What kind of ant talks that much?"

* * *

Stunned viewers stared at the technical difficulties notice that had interrupted the broadcast on their screens.

"The hunters... What's happened to the hunters?"

"What was that ant just now?"

"Are you serious? How could they cut the broadcast at a time like this?!"

A magic-beast ant had appeared out of nowhere, and the hunters had been helpless against it. To the viewers who had been celebrating the death of the queen, that last scene of the winged magic-beast striking the hunters down had been sobering.

The host of the livestream came on-screen.

"Ah... This just in."

The host sorrowfully reported the death of Hunter Byunggu Min to the audience and added that the status of the other hunters in the ant cave was currently unknown.

"Damn it!"

"The hunters killed the queen, so why are they dying?!"

"Where's Japan?"

"Isn't this an allied raid? What's the Japanese team doing?"

Some people were angry, others were worried, and still others were grieving. The news of the possibility of the hunters not making it out alive despite risking

their lives to fight the magic beasts ran rampant. Despite the stream cutting out, the audience rating shot up even higher.

“Oh!”

The host’s somber face brightened as they received an urgent message.

“An unidentified hunter has appeared on the scene! We will return to the live broadcast shortly.”

That single announcement was enough to reenergize the weary audience. Soon, the live feed was back up.

“What?”

“Oh my gosh!”

People jumped out of their seats as the images of shadow soldiers filled their screens. The soldiers were locked in combat with the swarm of ants that kept pouring into the queen’s den.

The camera stopped panning to zoom in on a close-up of a single person. It was hard to make out who this was, as the camera was too far away.

“I’m told that those armored soldiers are the minions of the hunter being shown. I’m also receiving news that most of the other hunters are safe and sound.”

The anxious audience cheered at this. They started yelling encouragements at their screens.

“Crush them all!”

“Yes! Go get ‘em!”

“Let’s go!”

That was when the unidentified hunter summoned a slew of new soldiers who immediately began massacring the ants.

Whooooaaa!

People lost their minds and threw their hands in the air. Those seeking retribution for family or friends they’d lost to the ants teared up at the long-overdue sight.

The host raised their voice as if they had been waiting for just the right time to share this next bit of information.

“Ah! We’ve just confirmed the identity of the hunter!”

Everyone waited attentively for them to continue.

Who could that man be? What was the identity of someone who could rescue S-rank hunters from a place overrun with S-rank magic beasts?

“It’s Jinwoo Sung, the tenth S-rank hunter of Korea! He’s a mage hunter, and summoning magic is his specialty!”

Viewers were especially thrilled that this incredible hunter was decidedly not Japanese.

They watched as countless ants were destroyed in no time. But just as the group of hunters was about to escape from the cave, they were blocked by yet another swarm of ants.

“Huh? What?”

“That’s...”

The winged ant they’d seen just before the broadcast cut earlier casually strolled out from the pack. Ants with wings were still uncommon, and its face was easily distinguishable from the horde.

Those at home were perplexed.

“The heck? It’s not dead?”

“That monster’s the one that beat up the hunters earlier, isn’t it?”

“Why is it back?!”

The winged ant stopped in front of Jinwoo.

Those knowledgeable about the different classes of hunters were devastated by this matchup.

“Oh no, he’s a goner.”

“How could a mage hunter let a magic beast get so close to him?”

“Run while you still can!”

The magic beast had knocked out Haein, a brawler, with a single punch. The outcome here was already decided. When the ant suddenly grew in size, the anxious audience began to panic. People screamed in horror as the scene unfolded.

And then...

Pow!

Those with weak stomachs squeezed their eyes shut as they expected the magic beast to split the hunter's head wide open.

But strangely, Jinwoo was completely fine.

Huh?

Hunter Ma, a tank, was knocked down with one punch, but a mage hunter survived?

The audience was already flabbergasted, but then...

Ka-pow!

The ant was slammed into the wall.

"....."

"....."

The viewers were having trouble processing what had just occurred, but when the camera panned to show the Ant King stuck in the wall...

Yeaaaaaaaah!

They exploded in cheers once more.

* * *

"Whoa!" The cameraman's jaw hit the floor.

He'd felt nauseous at the ant's initial strike, since he'd already seen what the beast could do when he'd attacked Hunter Cha. But though this was the same ant that had played around with six S-rank hunters as if they were toys, Jinwoo had blown him away.

The cameraman's outburst was a knee-jerk reaction.

Are the other S-rank hunters that weak?

No, that couldn't be the case. These were hunters who had bravely fought and expertly eliminated the S-rank queen, after all. It was genuinely strange that the mutant ant had overwhelmed the hunters and stranger still that Hunter Sung was able to punch the lights out of that beast.

Gulp!

The cameraman forced down his excitement and swallowed hard.

The reactions of the other hunters weren't much different. While everyone else was busy excitedly watching Jinwoo, Jongin suddenly glanced around.

The cavern was littered with ant corpses. At first, he'd thought the others hunters had worked together to defeat them while he was unconscious. Looking at Jinwoo now, though, he suspected differently.

Did...Jinwoo do this on his own?

His eyes shook as he hurriedly counted the number of bodies.

SKREEEEEEEE!

Jongin turned back at the unexpected roar.

The Ant King was seething as he pulled himself out of the debris. The air in the den seemed to vibrate with tension.

Hmm...

Jinwoo stared at the ant, puzzled. The creature had suffered less damage than he'd expected.

Is it because of his exoskeleton...?

The hard shell covering the beast's entire body was durable beyond any known organic material. Jinwoo would have to crush him with brute strength. He needed a hammer rather than his usual daggers.

The muscles on Jinwoo's shoulders and arms bulged, and the air grew heavy. The Ant King finished his roar and snarled as he spun to face Jinwoo.

"How dare you!"

The gap between the two quickly narrowed as they sped toward each other until they were finally face-to-face. They exchanged heavy blows without holding back.

Ka-pow!

Bam!

Thwack!

The other hunters were astonished as the cave trembled from the clash of magic powers. The waves of mana made even the S-rank hunters feel sick.

“Hurk...!”

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yes, I’m fine.”

Compared to the rest of them, the cameraman was only an A-rank hunter and so was trying his best not to vomit from nausea.

Urgh...

His face was pale, but the reason he could keep smiling was...

Ba-dump! Ba-dump! Ba-dump!

To think a lone hunter could keep pace with such a creature...!

...because he saw hope.

Ka-boom!

Jinwoo was definitely taking damage as well, but the Ant King’s shell was clearly starting to crack, and these changes to his impressive frame hadn’t escaped the beast’s notice.

Krik!

Krik!

His exoskeleton, which was harder than any known metal, was starting to show hairline cracks.

In comparison, his enemy seemed to be enduring the ant’s blows.

Could it be...? An impossible theory popped into the Ant King's head.

A-am I physically weaker than the human?

Even though the human was only half the magic beast's size?

Unfortunately for him, that was when...

Crack!

The ant sustained a hit on his side that both felt and sounded different than earlier. His exoskeleton didn't hold any nerves, so he spared a glance down to check the situation and discovered something shocking.

...It's split open.

There was an actual crack. It was small, but it was spreading like a spiderweb. It was a clear message that the Ant King didn't have much time left.

He quickly turned his attention back to the fight, but Jinwoo wasn't an inexperienced newbie who'd pass up an opportunity while his opponent was distracted.

Wham!

The beast's face turned around to one side.

.....?

He staggered as he felt the blow even under his impenetrable facial exoskeleton. He was barely able to regain his balance before he took another punch under the jaw.

Thud!

The ant's chin snapped upward.

This inferior creature is...!

The ant could only glare down as his head was forced upward.

This human was powerful...but brute strength was all he had. The Ant King had several deadly weapons up his sleeve.

As soon as the Ant King righted his head, he opened his mouth and shot out a venomous needle attached to the end of a long tentacle. It was an unavoidable

close-quarter attack directed straight at the enemy's face.

Ffft...

The human immediately jerked his head out of the way to avoid getting stabbed, but the ant was pleased with the result. The needle had scratched the human's cheek.

Got him!

That should suffice. The Ant King had consumed cone snails and absorbed a skill from them called Paralysis Venom. The most lethal toxin created by any living creature had been mixed with his magic power to create a concentrated venom. The Ant King had used Predation to manufacture a deadly poison.

You've given me a hard time, human.

Even the slightest scratch would paralyze the nervous system in the blink of an eye, causing the opponent to lose control of their body. His enemy unable to resist him, all the Ant King would have to do was crush the opponent once and for all.

".....?"

The human looked bewildered as the poison began spreading through his body.

"Behold the power of a king!"

The ant gleefully lashed out at the human's face.

However...

Whud!

The human raised his left hand to block his claw.

.....?

The ant had but a brief moment to wonder how the human could move his arm before...

Ka-pow!

...the man swung his other fist and sent the ant tumbling across the den.

KEH!

For the first time, a cry of pain spilled out from the ant.

* * *

Ping!

Jinwoo checked his notifications at the sound of the electronic chime.

[Detoxing is complete.]

So I guess this is why he was so happy?

No wonder Jinwoo had sensed confusion from the ant when his opponent could move unimpeded.

What a fascinating development. What Jinwoo found marvelous wasn't his detox buff but the fact that, at some point, he'd gained the ability to sense the emotions of magic beasts.

I think it started with my battle with the high orcs...

He'd just assumed that he'd been able to understand their emotions through their facial expressions and gestures, but unlike the high orcs, the ant wasn't a humanoid magic beast. Other than occasional distortion, the ant was rather expressionless.

Is this due to the perception stat?

Since all his stats had increased drastically, his perception stat had likewise increased exponentially. It was possible that he'd unlocked some kind of ability when it had reached a certain level.

...Anyway, no time to think about that now.

His focus had to be on killing the beast and getting off the island.

Jinwoo ran toward the Ant King as he tried to get back up.

.....

Jinwoo could feel the beast panicking. His continuous attacks had almost broken through the exoskeleton. Just a little more...!

Jinwoo closed the gap between them in an instant and executed a flying kick.

Blam!

But the ant was already gone, and his foot slammed into the ground.

“Where did he go?”

“He disappeared!”

While the hunters scanned their surroundings for the ant, Jinwoo calmly looked up. The creature had used his wings to fly above their heads.

This is quite convenient.

Jinwoo smirked. It was a simple task to track the ant by his emotions. The creature had gone from panicked to nervous and was now delighted.

The Ant King changed his tactics.

If the human's specialty is physical strength, there's no need to face him head-on.

The ant's true specialty was his speed. That was how he'd done away with the man who had lied about being the king of humans without a shred of resistance. Trying to defeat Jinwoo in combat had been an attempt to show off.

The Ant King decided to give up on this vain gesture and put his other abilities to good use.

Shf, shf, shf...

The ant shrank back to his normal size, and his claws lengthened into sharp blades.

His claws...

As he watched the ant's physical transformation, Jinwoo had a hunch the creature would change his method of attack.

Vmmm...

Jinwoo brought out two daggers from his inventory and held them tightly.

Whoosh!

The Ant King dived toward Jinwoo at an incredible speed.

.....

Jinwoo concentrated. As time slowed for him, Jinwoo was able to see each and every movement the ant made. Jinwoo was most confident in high-speed combat, so he was finally in his element.

The king's claws came fast, but Jinwoo easily blocked them with the tips of his daggers. The ant landed on the ground, and Jinwoo spun to face him. They collided spectacularly.

Ka-clang!

Klang! Klang!

The ant was growing more and more unnerved with each attack they exchanged.

Impossible!

His enemy was as fast as he was. Not only that, but he was getting faster with each passing moment, as if his muscles had just finished warming up.

How can...this be...?

The king had been able to resist losing ground during their battle of strength, but now he was slowly sliding backward. One step, then another. The farther back he fell, the more cracks appeared on his exoskeleton.

And the farther he retreated, the more confident Jinwoo grew.

I can finish this.

Jinwoo could sense the ant's increasing distress. He was starting to falter.

In Jinwoo's opinion, the ant wasn't any stronger or faster than Balan, the Demon Monarch. Objectively, the ant might actually be the same level as Balan, or perhaps even higher. However, Jinwoo himself was much stronger than back then. He had leveled up quite a bit thanks to the completion rewards he'd received from the Demon's Castle quests.

Putting myself through all that was worth it.

He was finally able to experience how much his abilities had increased thanks to this particular opponent. He was absolutely exhilarated.

When the king took another step back, Jinwoo pushed two steps forward

and...

Fatal Strike!

His dagger finally penetrated the ant's armor. Fatal Strike was a skill that granted extra damage when he precisely targeted an enemy's weak point, and thanks to the cracks spreading across the Ant King's entire exoskeleton, the beast's whole body was a vulnerable spot.

Shhhk, shhhk, shhhk!

Tens of Fatal Strikes consecutively hit the magic beast.

[Skill: Fatal Strike has been upgraded to its ultimate version, Skill: Mutilation.]

Mutilation?

Since he had acquired a new skill, he decided to use it. In an instant, the dagger stabbed the Ant King's weak points multiple times, mutilating him.

Shhhk, shhhk, shhhk, shhhk, shhhk!

SKRAAAAAAW! The Ant King howled.

While he writhed in pain, Jinwoo cut off an arm.

Slash!

The long black limb fell limply to the ground.

GRAHHH!

With that, the Ant King hurriedly launched himself into the air, abandoning any pride and desire for revenge. His survival instincts kicked into full gear. However, Jinwoo wouldn't give him so much as an inch.

The Ant King sensed someone chasing after him and looked back.

The human is...flying?

Jinwoo had flung himself into the air using Ruler's Hand, and he proceeded to cut off one of the king's wings.

Whud!

The Ant King started to fall to the ground. As he did, in his shock and fear, he

desperately tried to think of a way to escape his fate.

I...I have to think of something I'm better at...

Strength, speed, and even the ant's secret weapon, venom, hadn't worked on the human. The ant couldn't think of anything else. Did he not have a single advantage?

Then, just before he lost hope, the magic beast remembered one last thing he had in his arsenal—numbers.

The human was but one enemy while he commanded an army of several thousand ants. His brave warriors were awaiting his orders at this very moment.

The Ant King pointed at Jinwoo with his remaining hand as he awkwardly pulled himself up.

SKRAAAAAAAAAAAA!

At the furious screech, the swarm of ants rushed inside the den.

What now, human?!

SKRAAAAAAAAAAAA!

The ant's scream was never-ending. It was his attempt to both regain his pride and boost his soldiers' spirits.

The king leveled a confident gaze at the human.

"....."

Yet the ant was met with a sea of black crashing in from the other side of the den as well.

Go!

Jinwoo gave an order to his shadow soldiers. The Monarch's Domain he'd activated earlier was still going, so his strengthened shadow soldiers charged at the enemy.

Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud!

Their thunderous footsteps echoed throughout the cavern.

And...come forth.

Last but not least, Jinwoo summoned Fang. Fang looked around and scratched the back of his head as if he felt awkward at being summoned all by his lonesome.

Jinwoo spoke firmly to Fang as he placed the Sphere of Avarice in his hand.

“Only target the ants. If so much as a spark touches any of the humans, I won’t be summoning you ever again.”

Fang gave a confident nod and, after sizing himself up with the Song of Giants, began to spew pillars of fire.

FWOOOOOOOOM!

Even though Jinwoo had seen Fang do this often enough, he was amazed nonetheless.

It feels like his flames are getting bigger as time goes by.

Perhaps it was because Fang’s level had increased?

While Jinwoo was taking in the familiar sight, the other hunters had quite a different response. They had been watching the battle between Jinwoo and the Ant King intently when the sudden appearance of a monstrous-looking minion made them all gasp out loud. Some had a more extreme reaction than others.

“Th-that’s a minion? You’re honestly telling me that’s a minion?” Taegyu yelped as he pointed at Fang.

The other hunters’ mouths were hanging wide open, yet no one could answer him. Everyone had the same thought. Was that thing really a minion? From his look and abilities, he seemed more like a demon king incarnate!

In any case, ants were being incinerated by the blasts.

The Ant King started to tremble.

These are the human’s soldiers...?

Hundreds of the king’s subjects were literally evaporated in less than a minute as they were engulfed by the strange monster’s flames.

For the first time ever, the Ant King was afraid of another being. He felt an insurmountable wall between their skills and came to the realization that he

had no way to overwhelm this enemy.

He had been utterly defeated.

But how...?

Even though I was brought to life to battle powerful humans...

That was the king's only purpose in life. He'd nurtured his power for the sake of his mission. He'd even absorbed the abilities of humans. And yet the ant couldn't defeat Jinwoo.

The Ant King quivered and turned his back on the fight. He needed to get as far away as possible from this human. In that instant, his concern for his kingdom and soldiers was erased from his mind.

Thanks to the healing skill he'd acquired from one of the humans, his severed wing had regenerated quickly. He flew into the air.

I must get as far away...

But then...

Thud!

The magic-beast ant plummeted to the ground as an invisible force pushed down from above.

GRAH!

Fluid sprayed out of his mouth as he smashed into the floor of the cave.

Jinwoo had used Ruler's Hand like a flyswatter. He walked over to the ant without delay.

I can't let him go.

The king was a powerful magic beast, and Jinwoo wanted to extract his shadow, no matter what. And in order to do that...

I need to kill him first.

The Ant King spotted Jinwoo's approach. The ant looked so terrified that Jinwoo almost pitied him.

S-SKREE!

The Ant King eventually tried to crawl away. Gone was the majestic attitude he'd displayed when he'd toyed with the other hunters.

"There, you're finally acting like an insect."

Jinwoo quickly caught up to him and unleashed Mutilation at his back.

As he did, a message appeared.

Ping!

[You have defeated an enemy.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Yes!

Jinwoo pumped his fist. But his elation didn't last long.

"Hunter Sung!"

Jinwoo turned around at Yoonho's call and saw the guild master's dark expression. He quickly made his way toward him. The other joyous hunters turned to face Yoonho as well.

"Hunter Cha is..."

Yoonho didn't finish, but Jinwoo could sense Haein's dwindling life force. It didn't look good.

Jinwoo's face hardened.

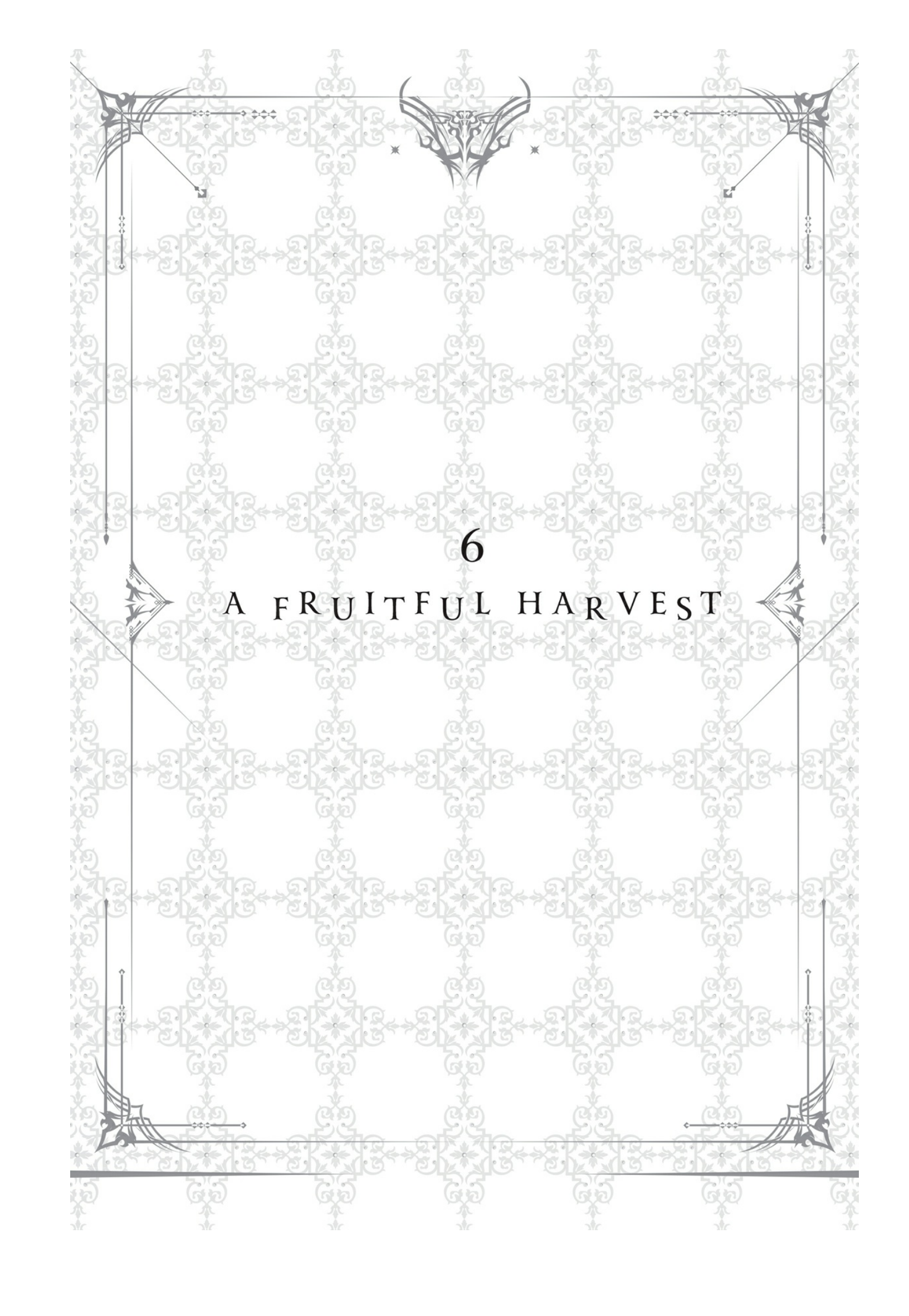
There wasn't much time. Even if he used Kaisei to fly Haein out, who knew how long it'd take to get to a hospital and find a healer who could treat her?

There has to be another way...

After thinking deeply, he sensed a solution pop into his head. Jinwoo stood from where he'd been crouching by Haein's side.

Then he turned to the cameraman.

"Could you please turn off the camera for a moment?"



6

A FRUITFUL HARVEST



6

A FRUITFUL HARVEST

“Excuse me? The camera?”

“Yes.”

The cameraman looked at him, surprised. Jinwoo’s expression was sincere.

“Why the camera...?”

Jinwoo didn’t provide an answer.

“.....”

This was a tough call for the cameraman. Jinwoo had saved his life. Even now, he held multiple lives in his hands, so there was nothing the man wouldn’t do for him.

But to turn off the camera...

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that everyone in Korea was tuning in, so for a professional in the broadcasting industry, it was a very difficult request to hear.

Jinwoo spoke up as he hesitated.

“If you don’t turn it off, I’ll break it.”

The cameraman flinched at Jinwoo’s icy tone. If he chose to do so, would the combined efforts of the other hunters be enough to stop him? Whatever Jinwoo’s reason for this request, the A-rank hunter had no choice but to agree.

“Y-yes, sir.”

He removed his head-mounted camera and turned it off. Once Jinwoo confirmed that it had stopped recording, he took Haein from Yoonho’s arms.

I didn't want to have to threaten him, but...

There was no other option if he was going to help Haein. With her limp body cradled in his arms, Jinwoo surveyed his surroundings. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

What is he trying to do?

All the hunters waited for Jinwoo's next move.

Soon, Jinwoo opened his eyes. Having located what he needed, he started briskly walking deeper inside the ants' cave, careful not to jostle Haein. The others weren't sure what to make of this but eventually followed behind him.

Before long, Jinwoo stopped and carefully put Haein down. He then cleared the piles of ant corpses around him.

"Ah!" The cameraman gasped as he spotted something on the ground.

"Oh..." Everyone else swallowed hard.

There lay Byunggu's cold, lifeless body. It was horrendous seeing the headless corpse. Everyone realized why Jinwoo had asked for the camera to be turned off. No one would want to be subjected to that sight.

"Ngh..." Yoonho had been closer to Byunggu than anyone here. He turned away and squeezed his eyes shut.

But then...

Wait a minute...

A thought popped into his head.

How did Hunter Sung locate Byunggu among all these magic-beast corpses?

The answer was quite obvious. If Jinwoo wasn't using a special skill, there was only one other explanation. The mana signatures of humans were slightly distinguishable from magic beasts'. Jinwoo seemed to have successfully located Byunggu by the healer's residual mana.

If that was truly the case, Jinwoo's perception had to be off the charts. Even Yoonho's Eyes of a Beast, a skill specializing in mana detection, couldn't have accomplished this.

With that in mind, Yoonho turned back to Jinwoo. Although seeing Byunggu like this broke his heart, he wanted to observe with his own eyes what happened next.

Hunter Sung...what are you planning?

Yoonho broke into a cold sweat as he watched Jinwoo standing between Byunggu's and Haein's bodies.

Jinwoo inspected the black smoke emanating from Byunggu's corpse. This should be an indication that it was possible to extract a shadow. And as expected...

Ping!

[Shadow Extraction is possible.]

The familiar electronic sound and accompanying notification helpfully reminded Jinwoo of this possibility, though Jinwoo had already been certain from the moment he'd heard of the healer's demise.

He simply hadn't wanted to. He refused to turn an innocent person into one of the undead to use him as a soldier, even if that individual was an S-rank hunter. No decent person could do such a thing.

However...Jinwoo glanced down at Haein's face, which was growing paler by the second.

...This is the best I can do.

In a situation where every moment counted, what if he had the ability to call on the best healer to cure her? There was no debate. If Byunggu himself could choose, he would've made the same decision.

With an apprehensive look on his face, Jinwoo gave the command.

"Arise."

The result wasn't as he expected.

Ping!

[Shadow Extraction has failed.]

Jinwoo was both puzzled and worried. Had it failed because his Shadow

Extraction skill level wasn't high enough? Or was it because he'd been too hesitant to extract the shadow?

He cleansed his mind of any useless thoughts and spoke with conviction.

"Arise."

The transformation began.

Gaaaaaaaaah!

A frigid wind swept around them as a deep sound that was a cross between a yell and a scream echoed heavily.

The other hunters were wide-eyed as they felt chills crawl up their spines.

"Oh my gosh!"

"Look at that!"

A black hand shot out from Byunggu's shadow. It grasped the ground tightly as if it were desperate not to go back and pulled itself out.

No way!

Yoonho felt like his heart would stop as he watched. It might be difficult for everyone else to tell what was actually happening, but it was as clear as day to him.

Byunggu's mana had risen from his shadow and taken on a human form. To be precise, it had taken the form of a soldier wearing black armor. Soon, the minion was fully corporeal.

"....."

The hunters were speechless and could only stare at the new minion Jinwoo had summoned. They could sense that this minion possessed magic as powerful as an S-rank hunter.

No, could that be...?

Jongin's eyes widened in shock as the quick-witted man caught on to the truth.

While everyone else nervously held their breath, Jinwoo calmly gazed at

Byunggu's shadow.

When their eyes met, the shadow nodded. As soon as shadows were extracted, a bond was instantly created with Jinwoo. They understood exactly what their master desired.

Without a word from the hunter, Byunggu's shadow started to cast healing magic on Haein.

Vmmmm...

No sooner had warm light begun emanating from the shadow soldier's hands than Haein's complexion started returning to normal. The soldier was using the highest level of healing magic possible.

I was right!

Jongin trembled as his observations confirmed his theory.

The black soldier's identity was none other than Byunggu.

One by one, the other hunters also arrived at the same conclusion.

Dongwook's mouth had been hanging open from the moment the shadowy hand appeared.

"Master Sung, you're no ordinary summoner, are you?"

Jinwoo neither denied nor confirmed it, but he didn't have to. Each and every S rank here was a great hunter in their own right, as well as a leader of a top guild, after all. They understood even without an explanation.

"Then...can you utilize the power of the dead, Hunter Sung?" Jongin asked nervously.

Jinwoo nodded. He had no reason to hide his abilities anymore, and he didn't want to lie.

They wouldn't fall for a lie if I tried anyway.

It was a weight off his shoulders to be able to tell them. Others might fear this power, but Jinwoo appreciated how far it had helped him come. He was proud of the power of the Shadow Monarch.

Some of the guild masters felt a bit frightened of the source of Jinwoo's

power after hearing his confident answer.

He can summon minions by using the powers of the deceased?

The fiercer the battlefield, the stronger he grows... What a terrifying ability!

I don't even know what to say.

The hunters who had witnessed Jinwoo's capabilities with their own eyes today had many thoughts, especially Yoonho, who was also privy to Jinwoo's other secret.

Not only can Hunter Sung himself grow stronger, but he can also transform his defeated enemies into minions...

It was already difficult enough to predict the limit of Jinwoo's power. Yoonho shivered as he imagined the level of power within Jinwoo's grasp in the future.

The cameraman came to a sudden revelation. "So the reason you asked me to turn off the camera earlier was..."

Jinwoo's power could frighten even the strongest hunters in the country. It made sense that Jinwoo hadn't wanted to reveal such an ability to the entire nation.

At that moment, Byunggu's shadow stood up. The treatment appeared to be complete, and some pink was starting to creep back into Haein's cheeks.

Whew...

Jinwoo breathed a sigh of relief. Haein was still unconscious, but her breathing and pulse were back to normal. Her wound was also completely healed.

Jinwoo placed his hand on Byunggu's shoulder as a gesture of praise for a job well done.

.....

Based on the warmth coming from the shadow's eyes, Jinwoo was able to tell what kind of person Byunggu had been when he was alive. Jinwoo removed his hand from Byunggu's shoulder and then...

Release.

With a light smile on his face, Jinwoo released Byunggu's shadow. The man had given up his life to fight against magic beasts, so Jinwoo couldn't justify keeping him as one of his soldiers. He decided that wasn't the right way to honor a fallen comrade.

...Time to leave.

He pushed any lingering regrets to the back of his mind and lifted Haein from the ground.

After the magic-beast ants lost both their queen and king, they'd retreated to different areas of the island to escape from Jinwoo's shadow soldiers. The cave that had once been crawling with the ants was now completely empty.

Jinwoo took a few steps, then looked over his shoulder.

"Shall we go?"

The hunters were physically recovered thanks to the system's potions, but the whole ordeal had been mentally draining, so they automatically brightened at Jinwoo's words.

It was finally over. The huge smiles on their faces made it clear how they felt.

Thanks to a bit of lucky timing, they safely emerged from the cave just as the retrieval helicopter started circling the sky above.

"The hunters are over there!"

"Great!"

The helicopter carefully landed upon spotting the hunters, and they boarded the aircraft one by one. Only two people dawdled outside—Jinwoo and Yoonho. Jinwoo gently handed Haein over to Yoonho instead of getting on the helicopter.

"What about you, Hunter Sung?"

"I still have things to take care of here."

Yoonho could only smile at that.

Jeju Island still had numerous magic-beast ants at large. Had any other person said they were going to stay alone on this island, Yoonho would've called them

insane.

It took a monstrous hunter to deal with such monstrous beasts. Yoonho didn't think anything Jinwoo did would ever surprise him again.

"By the way..." Yoonho wanted to ask Jinwoo one last thing before leaving the island. "Then Byunggu—or rather, the minion who came from him... What will happen to him? Will he have to fight on as your soldier forever?"

Jinwoo shook his head. "I released the summon, so you won't ever be able to see him again."

Yoonho nodded with a content smile. "I'm glad."

"Huh?"

"That kid, he absolutely hated fighting. Byunggu would've appreciated it."

With that, the six brave warriors and their intrepid cameraman left Jeju Island. Their fight was over.

However, things were merely beginning for Jinwoo.

Only one more level until I reach 100.

Considering how many magic beasts remained, that shouldn't be a problem. What was more, there were plenty of shadows to extract in the ant cave.

It was showtime.

Let's take care of those escapees first...

Jinwoo grinned and summoned Kaisel.

* * *

At the Hunter's Association of Japan, President Matsumoto turned off the huge monitor in anguish.

A Korean hunter had single-handedly dealt with the magic beast that had killed ten of Japan's best hunters.

How? How is this possible...?

He tugged at the few remaining bits of hair he had on the side of his head.

Something unimaginable had happened. Due to this incident, Japan's power

had been diminished by more than half, and his position as the president of the association was in critical danger.

Had Korea failed their mission, he could've overcome this crisis by asking other countries for help. But the Korean hunters had both cleanly defeated the queen and safely escaped the hands of the monstrous king and his army of several thousand ants.

Jinwoo Sung. That single hunter had foiled his plans.

Jinwoo Sung...Jinwoo Sung...

President Matsumoto recalled a phone conversation with Ryuji they'd had while the hunter was stationed in Korea.

"There's...there's an incredible hunter here in Korea."

"Better than you?"

"Possibly."

"....."

"We may have to alter our plans a bit."

If only... If only he'd listened to Ryuji at the time. Ryuji was better at analyzing the power levels of other hunters than anyone else, and this was the first Korean hunter he'd ever praised.

How could I have been so arrogant...?

Had they thoroughly analyzed Jinwoo's abilities, they could've cooperated with Korea and avoided all these issues. In fact, had Japan left Korea to its own devices, Korea could've taken care of the problem on their own.

President Matsumoto had dug his own grave by trying to trick them.

"M-Mr. President?"

One of his staff members worriedly called to him at his ashen complexion.

President Matsumoto waved them away without looking up, wanting to be left alone. The employee bowed and hurriedly excused themselves.

President Matsumoto frowned.

There's only one way out of this situation for me.

He needed to restore the power of the Hunter's Association of Japan, and he needed just one person in order to do that.

Jinwoo Sung...

He had to recruit Jinwoo to the Hunter's Association of Japan by any means necessary. Since Ryuji had lost his life in vain, this was the only viable way to revitalize the organization.

Since the entirety of Korea had watched what Jinwoo could do, it wouldn't be an easy task, but one of Korea's S-rank hunters had been successfully poached by another country before, so it wasn't unheard of.

How can I recruit Hunter Jinwoo Sung?

President Matsumoto cast out any despair from his mind as the gears began turning once more.

* * *

On the eastern coast of the United States...

Riiing, riiing, riiing!

The phone wouldn't stop ringing. David Brannon couldn't stand it any longer and finally picked up.

What kind of lunatic calls at this hour?

David was the head of the Hunter Command Center, the most powerful organization in America. If this was a prank call, he was going to track down the caller using any means necessary and throw them in jail.

Beep!

"Hello?"

"Sir, it's me."

"Assistant Director...?"

David pushed himself upright as the familiar voice drove away any vestiges of sleep.

“What are you doing calling at this hour?”

“There’s something you have to see.”

“Something...?”

He checked his cell phone and saw that he’d received seven missed calls and a video file. He’d missed them because his phone had been muted.

“Understood. I’ll call you back after I take a look.”

“No need, sir.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I’m already outside your house.”

“What?”

David shot up out of bed and checked the clock on his bedside table. It was exactly 4:12 in the morning. He tossed his phone to the side and rushed over to the window to see the assistant director waiting in a parked car in front of his house. The assistant director waved in greeting when they made eye contact.

David turned away from the window, speechless.

What in the world?

He sensed something huge had occurred, and he tightly gripped his phone, ready to give the video a watch.

The video finished playing.

“.....”

It was about a raid in a small eastern country. David, the director of the Hunter Command Center, was stunned by the contents.

“What are your thoughts?” the assistant director asked cautiously.

“Is there anything to say?” the director answered instantly. “You’re here at this hour because you knew how I’d react.”

David was right. It was, after all, very unusual for the director and assistant director of the Hunter Command Center to hold a meeting at four in the morning in the director’s kitchen.

The two men sat in silence at opposite ends of the table.

Puff, puff...

The director lit a cigarette as he replayed the video. Even the second time around, the footage was spectacular. David was especially thrilled at the part when the hunter summoned the shadow soldiers to deal with the ants.

.....

What more was there to say? He continued puffing on his cigarette.

The director's wife appeared at the top of the stairs, looking for her husband. She called out to him.

"Dave, is everything all right?"

He wordlessly gestured at his wife to go back upstairs. She obliged with a concerned look.

After his third cigarette, he spoke quietly. "That man is too talented to stay in a small country like South Korea."

"I agree."

"Do we know anything about him?"

The assistant director took out a file containing Jinwoo's personal information. The director gave a pleased smile as he skimmed the papers.

"Good."

The raid on Jeju Island had ended only about an hour ago, but he already had all this information at his disposal. The file was comprehensive, including details on what kind of hunter Jinwoo was as well as his personal relationships. Such was the power of the United States.

Meanwhile, the assistant director kept his smile hidden.

We got lucky.

Their intelligence network was certainly impressive, but luck had also been on their side this time, thanks to the previous Ilhwan Sung incident.

They hadn't been sure if the unidentified being discovered in a dungeon was a

human or a magic beast. Said unidentified being had insisted that he was a South Korean hunter. The center had retained all the information they'd collected on him at the time.

At this moment, other than Korea, no one else knew anything about Hunter Jinwoo Sung, much less his name. America was two steps ahead of everybody else.

God bless the United States of America.

The assistant director couldn't help but think that the heavens were looking out for them. However, it took more than a little luck to succeed. Someone had to turn that luck into opportunity.

The assistant director now put on a serious expression. "He was never properly compensated despite losing his father to a gate."

"Hmm..."

"Additionally, before he was reawakened, he almost died numerous times trying to earn enough money to pay for his mother's hospital bills."

"...Well, that's unacceptable."

A hero had died while fighting magic beasts for his country, but his widow and son were neglected? This was unimaginable in the United States.

"Also, this is unconfirmed, but..."

The director looked up from what he was reading, and the assistant director spoke in a hushed voice.

"He hasn't joined a guild as of yet."

".....!"

That was interesting news. The director closed the file.

"This is different from the Dongsoo Hwang case."

At the familiar name, the assistant director's gaze changed.

The director continued. "Poaching two S-rank hunters from the same country...that would be like turning our backs on our own."

South Korea was a longtime ally of the United States. That meant whatever they did would cause a huge storm.

Yet the assistant director confidently persisted. “Still...isn’t he worth it?”

“.....”

Of course. The director couldn’t deny it.

And so, instead of replying, he asked, “Can you do this?”

The assistant director offered him the same answer he’d given when he’d been assigned to recruit Dongsoo Hwang.

“I’ll do my best.”

That very response had gotten him promoted to where he was today. This wasn’t his first rodeo.

The United States already had two of the strongest hunters in the world, so powerful that they were classified as “national-level” hunters, but the director desperately wanted to bring this man to America as well.

As he lit his fourth cigarette, the director proclaimed, “Give him whatever he wants. Just bring him to me.”

* * *

Jinwoo used Kaisei to fly around, searching for and exterminating every ant that had escaped his shadow soldiers.

SKRAAAH!

Another ant hit the ground with a throw of a dagger. Jinwoo easily recalled the blade without dismounting Kaisei by using Ruler’s Hand.

I think it’s almost time to level up.

There weren’t many ants left, and, if possible, Jinwoo wanted to level up here.

One more level, and he’d reach 100. Jinwoo was partial to numbers that were multiples of five, so one hundred was a very special number to him.

And without any gates booked, he currently had no other way to gain experience points. If he was lucky, he might receive a key from a random box or

a dungeon break might happen nearby.

Is lucky the right word for a dungeon break?

At least one strike squad would have to fail during a raid in order for a dungeon break to occur. In conclusion, it was better for everyone that he reached level 100 this way.

There was something else weighing on his mind. When he was trying to extract Byunggu's shadow, he'd recalled a painful memory. Jinwoo had failed twice when trying to extract the shadow of Barca, the boss of the Ice Slayers.

When he'd failed to extract Byunggu's shadow on the first go, his heart had sunk at the thought of failing once more.

But somehow, I managed it on the second try...

If at first you don't succeed...

There was no way of guaranteeing success when he extracted the Ant King's shadow, especially since the ant's abilities were incomparably stronger than Byunggu's. Jinwoo wanted to level up at least once in order to increase his chances of a successful extraction even a little.

Huh?

Something caught his attention, and he ordered Kaisel to land.

Kreeee!

Kaisel slowed the flapping of his wings as he touched down. Jinwoo dismounted to inspect the area.

It must be around here...

Jinwoo searched the bushes, frowning each time he discovered a human corpse. The bodies of Japanese hunters were scattered throughout the area. Some were headless while others were damaged beyond recognition. Jinwoo looked at them closely.

What strong magic power...

They had clearly been powerful hunters, the likes of which shouldn't have been killed in a place like this. Even so, the Japanese hunters had been brutally

murdered. It could only mean that their opponent had been just that powerful.

This is probably the work of that monstrous ant.

Jinwoo couldn't think of any other culprit. The first time the ant had struck him in the head, he'd felt actual pain in his jaw. Chances were, they had been knocked off their feet with a single blow.

Jinwoo walked around the area with a bitter taste in his mouth, then abruptly stopped.

This energy...

He crouched to check the ground. It was sticky with a huge amount of blood. The residual mana was one he'd encountered before.

...Ryuji Goto.

Jinwoo scanned the area. Although he could sense Ryuji's magic power, his body was nowhere to be found. It looked as if the ant had completely consumed him.

Tsk.

Jinwoo shook his head as he stood. For the strongest hunter in Japan to die like this...

Right then, the shadow soldiers he'd sent to hunt down the rest of the ants informed him that they were done.

...That's it?

Any other Korean would cheer if they heard this news, but Jinwoo pursed his lips in disappointment. That meant he wouldn't be able to level up. Since there were no more living magic beasts left, he had nothing else to do but return to the ant cave to extract shadows from the monstrous ant and his queen.

But at that moment...Jinwoo paused.

Wait...there are still some left?

His acute senses detected something promising in the area. Quite a few promising things, in fact! Jinwoo's disappointment was replaced by excitement.

He swung himself onto Kaisei's back.

“Let’s go!”

* * *

It was as Jinwoo expected. His face glowed as he entered the spawning grounds.

Countless eggs filled the floor, the walls, the pillars, and the ceiling. Movement underneath the translucent shells indicated that these were definitely living magic beasts.

I’m not sure how many experience points I can get from these, but...

These eggs might just be enough to cover the experience points he needed.

Jinwoo summoned shadow soldiers who specialized in wide-range attacks.

“Attention.”

Fang and three mage soldiers lined up according to rank. One by one, Jinwoo inspected the four soldiers and then placed the Sphere of Avarice in Fang’s hand.

“You know what to do, right?”

They all nodded, so Jinwoo pointed at the eggs.

“Begin.”

Terrifying flames shot out of the enlarged Fang’s mouth as the mage soldiers threw balls of fire everywhere.

Kra-kooooom!

Kaboom!

Boom!

The defenseless eggs were incinerated.

Skraaaa!

Jinwoo spotted some ant pupae in one corner. The pupae shells had melted away to reveal the almost fully grown ants inside, though they were now all dead. Every single one had wings.

Imagine if these beasts had reached adulthood and crossed the ocean with

that monstrous ant in the lead...

Even if the Korean hunters had succeeded in eliminating the queen, neither Korea nor Japan would have been able to avoid the aftermath. Jinwoo was glad he could put a stop to things here and now.

Kaboom!

Boom!

He took the Demon Monarch's Sword from his inventory after seeing his soldiers sweating profusely.

Should I try this out?

The impressive sword glowed with a blue light and sparked electricity with each swing. He had stashed it away in his inventory after acquiring it as a reward for defeating the Demon Monarch in the Demon's Castle. Its magic effect was the only reason he pulled it out now instead of his usual daggers.

Shiing!

Jinwoo swung the sword with all his might.

KRA-KOOOOM!

A storm of blue lightning raged in the room.

Oh!

Jinwoo was delighted. The sword didn't have the same destructive power or the stun effect as when the Demon Monarch had wielded it, but it was strong enough to incinerate the eggs.

It's a waste to just let this sit in my inventory, isn't it?

Jinwoo didn't think he'd use the sword much in the future, since he preferred daggers, but it was too good a weapon not to pull out now and then.

How long had he been dealing with these eggs? Eventually, he heard a welcome sound.

Ping!

[You have leveled up!]

Finally, Jinwoo exclaimed to himself.

He returned the Demon Monarch's Sword to his inventory and headed to the queen's den after leaving his soldiers behind to finish with the spawning grounds.

Naturally, the monstrous ant was still lying in the same spot where he'd died.

Jinwoo stood before the corpse. His heart pounded due to how badly he wanted the ant's shadow as a soldier.

However, he'd come to realize the importance of concentration when he'd extracted Byunggu's shadow.

I need to calm down.

He breathed slowly until his heart calmed, and he gazed coolly upon the ant's remains.

...Okay.

Jinwoo was in the right frame of mind.

He looked at the ground. Frighteningly thick plumes of smoke, the likes of which Jinwoo had never seen before, rose from the Ant King's body. Was this because the beast's magic power was on a different level compared to previous opponents?

As Jinwoo pondered this, he stretched his hand forward.

"Arise."

* * *

The area switched between bright to dark in quick succession, much like a flickering light bulb at the end of its life. Jinwoo looked up. The huge ball of light Jongin had cast during the attack on the queen was blinking.

Is the magic fading already?

That was his first guess. But it hadn't been an hour since the Korean hunters had first entered the den, so why was the spell wearing off so soon? Plus, it was a magic spell cast by an S-rank mage hunter to make the raid go smoothly for him and his teammates. Therefore, there was no way the magic was wearing off

already.

Then...

Could it be...?

Jinwoo wondered if the flickering was caused by Shadow Extraction.

Tak!

The area plunged into darkness. His high stat perception would've allowed him to see in the darkness if there was even the tiniest glint of light, but it was pitch-black.

It must've been only a second. In that short period of time, though, when the darkness gave way to light again, a monstrous ant had manifested before Jinwoo.

.....!

Startled, Jinwoo took a few steps back. If it wasn't for the notification of successful extraction he received, he would've attacked, thinking the monstrous ant had somehow respawned.

"Whew...that scared me." He let out a sigh of relief.

When he looked at the ant from a distance after he'd calmed down, he could see that the beast was definitely different from when he was alive. Eddies of black smoke continued to rise from his body.

So this is the Ant King's shadow...

Jinwoo wasn't sure how the ant's stats had changed, but his threatening presence seemed to be much more menacing than before. Jinwoo faced the shadow ant. As he sensed a mighty magic power within him, it finally sank in that he'd turned the formidable creature into his soldier.

Hmm...

Jinwoo wanted to act cool, but he couldn't keep from smiling.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

His heart fluttered like he was a child who had just received a present he had been begging for.

The shadow's information promptly appeared. Jinwoo squinted as he read the words floating above the shadow's head.

[?? LV.1]

General Rank

Jinwoo grinned as his eyes landed on the shadow's rank. It was one he'd never seen before, which meant that this soldier was on a whole different level compared to his other soldiers.

Considering his abilities when he was alive, that makes sense.

By rank alone, Jinwoo could tell this was no ordinary soldier. It made his efforts all the more worthwhile.

Then...

Shf...

As he made eye contact with Jinwoo, the shadow dropped down to one knee. Like the other soldiers, this one possessed absolute loyalty to him.

Nice.

Satisfied, Jinwoo turned to extract the queen ant next when...

"My king..."

Jinwoo froze at the voice coming from behind him. He didn't spook easily, but his heart had almost stopped. Had it been an auditory hallucination?

He looked back, but even without checking, he knew for a fact that there was only one energy signature—that of the shadow ant. He was still on one knee with his head bowed.

.....

Jinwoo slowly faced him.

"Was that you?"

The waiting shadow opened his mouth once more.

"Please permit me...a name..."

The shadow's speech was faltering, but the words were definitely coming out of his mouth.

* * *

The helicopter carrying the hunters headed straight for Seoul.

Tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp!

When it landed on the roof of the Hunter's Association, President Go himself anxiously flung open the door.

"How is Hunter Cha doing?"

The hunters' gazes moved to where she lay unconscious on top of a blanket on the helicopter floor.

"Come quickly!"

The two waiting A-rank healers rushed in at President Go's order.

".....?"

".....?"

The two healers looked at each other in confusion.

"Is there something wrong?"

They simultaneously answered the president.

"She has no injuries..."

"Everything looks normal..."

"Are you saying you don't need to treat Hunter Cha?"

The healers nodded and explained further. "I don't know whose handiwork this was, but powerful healing magic was used on her. There's nothing for us to do."

President Go was perplexed. Her injuries had looked quite serious on the live broadcast. He had also received a report indicating that she was unconscious and in bad shape, which was why he had urgently searched for two A-rank healers and brought them here.

But...

She doesn't need treatment?

President Go scanned Haein thoroughly. It was true that her complexion didn't look bad. In fact, it seemed like she was merely sleeping.

What had happened while the camera was off?

He cocked his head.

There was no other healer...

Byunggu had been the only healer on the team, and he'd met a tragic end.

He turned to Dongwook, the leader.

"What happened, Hunter Ma?"

"The thing is..."

While Dongwook hesitated, unsure of how to explain things, one of the A-rank healers called out.

"Hunter Cha is waking up!"

Everyone's eyes were on her at once.

President Go, who had carefully sat down beside Haein, asked, "Hunter Cha, how do you feel?"

Haein slowly opened her eyes. "Where...?"

"You're inside a helicopter that has landed at the Hunter's Association. You'll be transferred to a hospital soon."

"Hospital...?"

Haein inhaled deeply and then looked around her. She was surrounded by Jinwoo's scent. She stared at President Go with bleary eyes.

"...Was Hunter Sung here?"

The other hunters were surprised to hear her mention Jinwoo, since he'd arrived after she'd been knocked unconscious. President Go elected to slowly nod instead of answering her.

Haein smiled faintly.

I knew it... It wasn't a dream.

Haein then fell back into a deep sleep. After confirming that her breathing was stable, President Go ordered his men to transfer her to the hospital so she could recover properly.

That's when he realized that Jinwoo wasn't there. He eyed Dongwook again.

"So where is Hunter Sung?"

Yoonho jumped into the conversation. "Hunter Sung...wanted to stay behind."

"Stay behind?" President Go couldn't comprehend what Yoonho was saying.

He knew for a fact that the helicopter, outfitted with a mana-powered engine, had come straight here from Jeju Island. It hadn't made any stops along the way, so where exactly was Jinwoo staying?

President Go asked again. "Where on earth do you mean?"

"Hunter Sung still had some business to take care of on Jeju Island."

"...Are you saying he didn't board the helicopter at all?"

President Go sounded alarmed, but Yoonho simply gave an awkward laugh and nodded.

"Yes."

* * *

"How can you talk?"

"I just...can."

While the shadow ant answered all of Jinwoo's questions, his responses unfortunately weren't very helpful. Was he able to talk because he was Jinwoo's shadow soldier or because he had been able to talk before the fact?

No.

Jinwoo shook his head. Iron, his loyal knight, had originally been a hunter named Chul Kim. He had been able to speak when he was human but remained mute now. Byunggu had been the same. He'd gone back to the void without uttering a single word. Fang used to be a talkative magic beast but had stopped speaking after becoming a shadow soldier. So how come this one was able to

talk? There was only one difference between him and the others.

Their rank...

The other soldiers were either elite knight or knight rank, but this shadow soldier was a never-before-seen general rank. In other words, his shadow soldiers should gain the ability to speak after achieving a certain rank. That was his running theory, since Jinwoo didn't have any irrefutable evidence to support this.

Maybe my current soldiers will also be able to talk as their ranks go up...

It seemed Jinwoo had gained one more reason to increase his soldiers' ranks. He thought about it for a moment, then decided to ask the ant something he'd always been curious about.

"I was the one who killed you."

"....."

"So why do you follow me so easily?"

"I..."

The shadow's answer was completely unexpected.

"...I didn't die...I was reborn...by my master's power..."

The soldier lifted his head. He looked Jinwoo square in the eyes and continued.

"Within my body now...there is overflowing...joy. I will follow only...my master for eternity."

Ba-dump!

Why was his heart beating so fast? Was it because Jinwoo could feel the shadow's sincerity? When the shadow ant swore his eternal loyalty, Jinwoo's heart began to race. He had to place his hand on his chest to calm it. His heart quickly slowed to its normal speed.

The shadow soldier lowered his head once more.

"My king...please permit me a name," he desperately asked Jinwoo.

And so the conversation had come full circle. It was a strange experience to be prompted by a soldier rather than by the system.

A name, a name...

Until now, Jinwoo hadn't put much thought into his soldiers' names.

But it's not like I can just call this shadow Ant or Bug, can I?

Jinwoo had several shadow ants already in his ranks, so if Jinwoo named him Ant, it wouldn't have the authoritative ring befitting a general.

So Jinwoo actually pondered for a bit before grinning.

"Beru."

He'd be named after the famous French author of the science fiction novel about an empire of ants.

He didn't waste time agonizing over this decision.

"Your name is Beru."

Beru bowed his head even lower than before in gratitude.

"Thank you...Master."

The information above Beru's head reflected the change.

[BERU LV.1]

General Rank

Done.

Jinwoo regarded the new name with pride and then turned.

It was time for the queen. The shadow extraction from the queen went smoothly as Jinwoo's confidence had received a boost from Beru's successful summon.

"Arise."

SKREEEEE!

A shadow beast identical to the queen rose up with a deafening screech.

“Nice!”

Jinwoo was about to celebrate his success but blinked after sensing something strange.

Hmm?

As soon as the queen’s shadow was created, the connections between Jinwoo’s shadow-ant soldiers grew faint, like the lines connecting him and the soldiers were covered in fog.

“Ber—”

Beru was already at his side before he could finish calling his name.

Tak.

If it wasn’t for Jinwoo’s increased perception stat, he wouldn’t have been able to follow Beru’s movements at all. For such a beast to be Jinwoo’s loyal soldier now... Jinwoo’s confidence soared.

“Do you know what’s happening here?”

Jinwoo gestured toward the queen with his chin. Beru knew how the ants worked better than any of his other soldiers.

Beru stood at attention as he answered. “Ruling the army of ants is...the queen’s unique ability.”

Ah... So this meant the control of the ants had immediately transferred to the queen.

That’s...

Though the queen answered to Jinwoo, he felt somewhat inconvenienced by the situation. He wouldn’t be able to give them orders directly.

Jinwoo rubbed his chin in thought.

“And why did the queen’s magic power decrease?”

“Most of the queen’s magic power is...for breeding. Breeding isn’t possible without...a physical body, so—”

Jinwoo cut Beru off. “That’s why her magic power is half of what it used to

be?”

“That is correct...Master.”

After putting everything together based on Beru’s information, Jinwoo concluded that the queen wouldn’t be useful to him after all. In the end, Jinwoo decided to release the queen. There wasn’t any reason to keep a subordinate who just took up space in his army, was there?

SKREEEEE!

The queen’s shadow turned to smoke and dispersed into the air.

[Number of shadows stored: 570/570]

He had already maxed out his soldiers.

All that’s left is collecting essence stones, right?

Jinwoo looked around. Essence stones of the highest quality, the likes of which could be found only in S-rank dungeons, were everywhere like ordinary pebbles. With no one to stop him, he could’ve kept all the essence stones for himself if he so chose.

But Jinwoo reined in any selfishness. He’d been told that these essence stones would be used to compensate victims and rebuild Jeju Island back to its former glory. Jinwoo wasn’t desperate enough to claim something of which he had no ownership.

Still, I can take this one, can’t I?

He removed the gem from Beru’s corpse. It was a beautiful jewellike essence stone that was pitch-black in color.

He pocketed the stone and summoned Kaisel.

Kreeeeee!

Kaisel flapped his wings, ready to fly. Jinwoo mounted the dragon’s back and briefly scanned the queen’s den.

Silence had settled in the once-clamorous space.

.....

The Jeju Island expedition was finally over.

Jinwoo turned toward the exit.

“Let’s go home.”

With that, Kaisel soared into the sky.

7

ALL EYES ON JINWOO



7

ALL EYES ON JINWOO

Kaisel landed in front of the Hunter's Association Headquarters.

Kreeeee!

The Hunter's Association was a busy hub for hunters. Shocked members of the association ran out of the building as a huge magic beast appeared in the middle of Seoul and landed right in front of their workplace. Surveillance Team hunters had tracked the approach of a being with magic power and so were ready with weapons brandished.

Everyone was astounded to see Jinwoo dismounting from the beast.

Return.

Kaisel melted back into Jinwoo's shadow at the order.

People recognized him immediately.

W-was that Hunter Sung's minion?

A magic beast like that is also under his control?

They'd seen on TV what Jinwoo was capable of. In their minds, it wasn't unreasonable for him to be commanding a magic beast as well.

Jinwoo approached someone he recognized, a hunter from the Surveillance Team who usually accompanied President Go.

"I would like to see the president."

President Go wasn't a man someone could meet with on a whim. Even members of the government had to wait at least a week to see him. But how could you say no to this man, a hunter who had suddenly popped up in the

middle of a raid he wasn't assigned to and dispatched a magic beast that was slaughtering S-rank hunters?

Besides, the president of the Hunter's Association was bound to want to meet with him as well.

The subordinate informed him, "The president is currently at the hospital."

"Is he ill?"

Jinwoo recalled that President Go's health wasn't the best. His heart condition might have been exacerbated by the raid broadcast.

"No, he went to check on Hunter Cha."

Jinwoo nodded. He realized he might not get to see President Go today.

The subordinate stopped Jinwoo before he could walk away. "I'll contact him for you. Please wait a moment in the reception room."

"Great, thank you."

Jinwoo was relieved. He had something he wanted to tell President Go as soon as possible.

* * *

Haein had been admitted to the official hospital of the Hunter's Association. President Go was waiting to hear from the doctor.

"How is she doing?" the president asked as soon as he saw the doctor.

"We haven't done a thorough examination, but...she seems to be stable. She's sleeping comfortably now."

"I see..." President Go nodded. Nothing he didn't know.

Haein's current condition was confusing to the doctor as he, too, had been watching the raid right next to President Go.

"Her face was pale from the loss of blood. How was Hunter Cha able to recover to this extent?"

"....."

The president had received a detailed report from her fellow hunters, but he

didn't share it with the doctor.

Even if I told him the truth, would he believe me?

Would the doctor believe that Jinwoo had treated Haein by using the power of a deceased healer? Besides, Jinwoo had asked for the camera to be turned off so as to keep this ability of his hidden, so President Go knew better than to spread the information around. Naturally, the other hunters had agreed with this decision.

"The A-rank healers I had on standby treated her."

"Her condition looked quite critical, but...I'm glad they made it."

Fortunately, it appeared as though the doctor believed President Go.

"Oh." The doctor recalled something. "About Hunter Sung..."

Jinwoo's name got the president's attention.

"What about him?"

As President Go's eyes sharpened, the doctor spoke quickly.

"You're aware that his mother was hospitalized here, right?"

"She had the Eternal Sleep Disease, no?"

"Yes."

President Go had read up on Jinwoo's family and relationships when the association investigated him. He imagined the worst-case scenario, and his face hardened.

"Did...did she pass away?"

The doctor shook his head. "Just the opposite."

"The opposite?"

"She woke up from her coma and was discharged immediately."

"Are you serious?"

"Everyone was in an uproar about that. It wasn't officially announced, but it happened in this very hospital, so..."

The hospital personnel had also watched the livestream, so naturally, Jinwoo's name was on everyone's lips. That was how news of Jinwoo's mother had reached the doctor's ears.

"She was cured of the Eternal Sleep Disease? Is that even possible?"

"As far as I know, this is the first case."

"When did Hunter Sung's mother wake up?"

"I think..." The doctor went over the date in his mind. "It should have been about five days ago."

"....."

President Go finally fit all the puzzle pieces together. He had invited Jinwoo to join the raid team around the same time that his mother had recovered.

Hunter Sung's father went missing in a gate, didn't he?

She'd lost her husband during a raid, so it would have been difficult for Jinwoo to leave his mother and participate, especially since it was an extermination mission that had previously failed three times.

President Go reflected on his failure to look into Jinwoo's situation more thoroughly.

That's why Hunter Sung passed on joining the raid.

Between Jinwoo's home situation and his performance in the mission, the potential misunderstanding had been fully cleared.

President Go was extremely pleased. Jinwoo was a rare young man, a type one would be hard-pressed to find these days, and President Go had come to favor him quite a bit.

At that moment, an association employee approached.

"Sir."

"What's the matter?"

"Hunter Min's family isn't answering our calls."

"You mean his mother?"

“Yes.”

That was understandable. Her son’s death had been announced on national TV. Her voice had trembled when she’d called the association. They’d had no choice but to gently confirm his death to her.

“I will visit her myself.”

“You’re going to see her personally?”

“A mother lost her son, and a funeral will be held without his body. Do you think she’s in the right state of mind to answer a phone call?”

“T-true, but...”

“I’ll personally go and give her my condolences as well as news about the raid.”

“...Understood, sir.”

The somber employee was about to leave when their phone rang. It was a call from the association, so they answered it with President Go’s permission.

“Pardon? Someone wants to see President Go? What?! He does?”

President Go shook his head. “I don’t want to see anyone today.”

The employee covered the phone receiver with their hand.

“Sir, the person who wants to see you is...Hunter Sung.”

“Hunter Sung?” President Go’s eyes widened, and he retracted his previous statement.

“Tell them I’ll be there right away.”

* * *

An employee escorted Jinwoo to the president’s office.

Jinwoo took a seat.

“Would you care for a drink?” asked the employee.

Jinwoo was going to decline, but he suddenly realized how thirsty he was. Thinking back, he hadn’t had a sip of water after all that fierce combat.

“Some water, please.”

“Thank you!”

“.....?”

What was the employee thanking Jinwoo for? The nervous employee’s face flushed at the mistake. They set a small bottle of water in front of Jinwoo and bowed.

“Please let me know if you need anything else.”

“Okay.”

The employee seemed more attentive and cautious than the last time Jinwoo had been in this room.

I bet it’s because of the broadcast.

Jinwoo guessed that most people would look at him or treat him differently because of it.

Soon, the president of the association entered.

“Hunter Sung!”

Jinwoo was about to get up, but President Go stopped him.

Jinwoo had just come back from Jeju Island. He’d fought a terrifying magic-beast ant that almost killed all their S-rank hunters. Jinwoo was the VIP of VIPs now. After Jinwoo had saved all those hunters’ lives, President Go wanted to treat Jinwoo as an equal.

He sat opposite Jinwoo instead of at the head of the table.

“I heard what happened in the ants’ cave.”

“Oh, yes.”

Then this conversation would go fast. Jinwoo was glad to hear it.

President Go continued. “And I also heard how you got here.”

Many people from the association had seen Kaisal, so there was no way it hadn’t reached the ears of the president of said association.

“Did you ride that beast to Jeju Island?”

Jinwoo had traveled to the island using Shadow Exchange, but there was no

need to reveal all his cards.

Jinwoo chose his words carefully. “Something like that.”

He had basically confessed that he was the culprit behind the magic beast seen in the skies over Seoul a few days ago, but this would let him ride Kiesel more freely in the future.

“I see.” It was as President Go had thought. He nodded.

Jinwoo could utilize the powers of dead magic beasts. If he had slain a magic beast capable of flight, it made sense that he could use it to get around.

With his curiosity satisfied, it was now time for President Go to get down to business.

“I was told you wanted to see me...”

“Yes.”

“May I ask what about?”

“I got rid of the ants on Jeju Island.”

“Pardon?” President Go sprang up from his seat. “Are you saying you killed every single one?”

“Yes,” Jinwoo answered firmly. “You can go to Jeju Island with no problem.”

“How...?”

But President Go had an inkling of how Jinwoo had pulled it off. Hundreds of Jinwoo’s minions had been captured on camera. They would be capable of scouring the entirety of Jeju Island and annihilating the ants in a short period of time.

People were able to set foot on Jeju Island now. That meant they could collect Byunggu’s dead body resting in the deepest recesses of the ant cave.

President Go had been rather unhappy that they wouldn’t be able to recover Byunggu’s body until the ants naturally died off within the next year, so tears welled up in his eyes at the prospect of recovering it sooner.

“Thank you, Hunter Sung,” President Go said with all the sincerity in the world.

Due to the news of the Jeju Island raid exploding, no one had noticed that the strongest hunter in the world was staying in a suite at one of Korea's grandest hotels.

Thomas turned off the TV special recounting the raid. He had already watched the actual footage three times.

Laura, a woman who was accompanying him on this trip, asked, "What do you think?"

"I mean...it's as you've seen."

Thomas leaned back on the couch and put his feet up on the table. The man had blond hair and a sharp nose, wore sunglasses indoors, and had a permanent smile etched on his face.

"So was that the guy Mr. Hwang was investigating?"

"Yes."

"And didn't Dongsoo also ask what would happen if he killed a man in Korea?"

"Yes."

Thomas had secretly looked into Dongsoo Hwang and Jinwoo Sung on his own after receiving the reports from Laura. There was only one connection between the two—Dongsoo's older brother, Dongsuk. Dongsuk and Jinwoo had gone into the same dungeon, but Jinwoo had come back out alive while Dongsuk had gone missing. Everyone knew that strange things happened inside dungeons.

"Revenge?"

"Looks like it."

"I didn't think Mr. Hwang had any family. He never mentioned anything."

"I hear Mr. Hwang's older brother hid any connections between them on his end."

"That means he was probably involved in something dirty."

It had to be something scandalous enough that it would damage Dongsoo's

reputation if it came to light. Laura's agreement was clear by her silence.

But then the Jeju Island raid had occurred.

"Because of this, it'll be even harder to get a meeting with Jinwoo Sung."

"I'd say so," Laura softly answered.

Thomas was one of the top hunters in the world and the guild master of the renowned Scavenger Guild. He had even used his personal vacation days to visit this tiny country because of Jinwoo Sung. Or to be exact, he wanted to gauge what might happen if Dongsoo fought Jinwoo. His excuse to the managers of the guild was that he was here to recruit an S-rank Korean hunter.

"That's too bad. I really wanted to meet him," Thomas wistfully mumbled.

Laura addressed him cautiously. "Wouldn't it be better if Mr. Hwang never met Hunter Sung?"

"Well..." Thomas smiled as he rubbed his chin. "Korea saved Mr. Hwang's life."

South Korea had refused to let Dongsoo back into the country, since he'd abandoned his mother country for America when he first became an S-rank hunter. This had been an international incident in the making, so Thomas had come to Korea to see the situation for himself. Unfortunately, Dongsoo Hwang wasn't the type of person to give up just because he was barred from returning to Korea, especially if his motivation involved revenge.

Thomas was quite a flexible person. He had no intention of incurring ill will by stopping Dongsoo from avenging the death of a family member. But Dongsoo's power was also important to the Scavenger Guild. Since he and Jinwoo were both S ranks, Thomas wanted to assess Jinwoo's abilities in advance just in case. After all, it would be troublesome if Dongsoo was defeated.

Thomas was rather relieved that they'd gotten to see Jinwoo in action.

"We can't let Mr. Hwang set foot inside Korea. Those two cannot meet."

"I understand. I'll cease all legal action as well."

"I'll talk to Hwang. I'll make up some excuse, since he's quite the persistent fellow."

Laura took meticulous notes on everything her boss said. There was one thing she was curious about, though.

“If...those two ended up having a fight despite our best efforts, what would you do?”

“Laura, don’t you know me?” Thomas smirked. “Mr. Hwang is an asset to the Scavenger Guild. And the Scavenger Guild is mine.”

His mouth was smiling, but the eyes behind his sunglasses were humorless. He always kept his sunglasses on in order to hide his piercing gaze.

Thomas lowered his voice as he sat upright on the couch.

“No one puts their hands on my assets. Not even the American government.”

Thomas Andre, one of five national-level hunters. The man was the power of a country personified.

* * *

“We’ll escort you home, Hunter Sung,” President Go quickly told Jinwoo as the other man made to stand up.

“Pardon?”

“If you wait a moment, one of our men will bring a car around. Why don’t you let us drive you back to your place?”

“.....”

Jinwoo felt the Hunter’s Association’s and President Go’s appreciation for what he’d done, but he didn’t want them going out of their way for such a small matter. His apartment wasn’t that far, and it certainly wasn’t worth the trouble of borrowing a car. Besides, he’d get home quicker by riding Kiesel or sprinting, so Jinwoo politely declined the president’s offer.

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

President Go shook his head. “I think...it’ll be more convenient if you took the car.”

“What do you mean...?”

The president walked over to the window instead of answering him.

“If you would...?”

Jinwoo joined him. That’s when he saw what was waiting for him.

The entrance of the association’s headquarters had been quiet just an hour ago, but now it was absolutely crawling with people.

“All those people came after hearing of your visit.”

Jinwoo didn’t have to ask how they knew.

I rode Kaisal to get here, didn’t I?

Everyone had at least one camera on them these days. Footage of Jinwoo dismounting Kaisal at the Hunter’s Association had quickly spread on social media, and those pictures had naturally reached the eyes of journalists.

It had taken a single sentence. The article wasn’t even that long.

Magic Beast Landed on Hunter’s Association Property. Owner is...?

The article stated that the magic beast didn’t seem like an ordinary monster and was black like a shadow, and when compared to the minions summoned by Jinwoo, there was a high possibility it belonged to the new S-rank hunter. Some of the people waiting in front of the association had come to confirm the rumor, and others had come to see Jinwoo himself.

Jinwoo felt a range of emotions after seeing the crowd.

President Go quietly looked down at the people before speaking calmly.

“As you well know...we Koreans have hungered for a victory.”

The great tragedy had occurred four years earlier. Because of the dungeon break on Jeju Island, Korea had become the only country in the world to have been forced to cede land to the magic beasts. Many countries had publicly expressed their condolences but laughed derisively in private at the incompetence of the Korean hunters.

After three different extermination missions had failed, public morale reached its lowest point. Two years passed as people lived in shame.

Then came the news of the fourth attempt with Japan. Some criticized Korea for being unable to deal with the magic beasts without outside help from Japan. But that was the truth of the matter.

But when Japan, with its twenty-plus S-rank hunters, turned their backs on Korea and retreated from the raid, Jinwoo had shown up with his army of shadow soldiers.

It was only natural that people were obsessed with Jinwoo. For people so thirsty, he was an oasis in a desert. The public had taken to the streets because they couldn't contain their joy at home. Then they'd heard Jinwoo was in the vicinity and had rushed over.

"Of course, you can ride the magic beast home," said President Go with a gentle laugh. "But could you please consider going down there for them? Those people...they need a hero."

* * *

Jinwoo pushed open the glass door of the association building. The noisy crowd instantly quieted. Silence fell as everyone gazed upon Jinwoo.

"....."

"....."

Jinwoo's clothes showed traces of his battles. There were stains from the bodily fluids of magic beasts as well as rips and tears made by the Ant King. But no one dared to laugh at his appearance. All sorts of emotions swelled from deep inside their hearts.

As Jinwoo and the crowd regarded one another, a heavy stillness settled between them.

"Mr. Hunter Sung, please come this way."

Jinchul Woo, who was in charge of escorting Jinwoo home, broke the quiet. Members of the Surveillance Team walked ahead of Jinwoo, asking people for their cooperation. Those in front quickly made way for him.

However, there was always an exception. As Jinwoo neared the car waiting for him, an elderly man approached.

“Mr. Hunter...”

One of the Surveillance Team members went to intervene but stepped back as Jinwoo stopped him at the sight of tears streaming down the elderly man’s face.

The old man called out to him as he choked back his sobs.

“Mr. Hunter... Because of you...my son can rest in peace.”

The elderly man almost collapsed as his legs gave out, but Jinwoo was quick to catch him. He clasped Jinwoo’s arm and bowed again and again.

“Thank you, Mr. Hunter...truly...”

“I simply did what was necessary. Please stand up.”

Jinchul, who had also been supporting the old man, left him in the care of a subordinate. He then whispered in Jinwoo’s ear.

“Hunter Sung, more people are gathering. We should go now...”

“Understood.” Jinwoo nodded.

Jinchul opened the back door for him. Jinwoo looked back at the crowd one last time.

No one knew who started it, but someone in the crowd made eye contact with Jinwoo and gave a quick bow of the head as a gesture of appreciation. Others soon followed. Everywhere Jinwoo looked, people were bowing to show their sincere gratitude.

“...Hunter Sung.”

Jinwoo finally slid into the car seat at the slight anxiety in Jinchul’s voice. Another Surveillance Team member got in behind the wheel, and Jinchul sat in the front passenger’s seat. The car slowly pulled away from the association.

Jinwoo wordlessly gazed out the window.

The crowd watched the car intently, not turning away until it was no longer in view.

Only then did Jinwoo face forward and gently place his hand on his chest.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

His heart was pounding with delight. Jinwoo had felt troubled when President Go asked him to greet the people, but now Jinwoo was glad he'd done as suggested. The happiness radiating from every gaze had been its own reward.

But then...

"Oh."

Jinchul urgently looked back at Jinwoo. "What is it, Hunter Sung?"

"...It's nothing."

Jinwoo massaged his temples as he remembered that he'd purposefully broken the TV in an attempt to protect his mother from the truth.

How can I explain this to her?

And just as he'd expected...when Jinwoo turned on his phone, he had thirteen missed calls from home.

* * *

The Internet was an absolute mess, as one would expect. The Jeju Island mission was Jinwoo's first official raid since he'd been reevaluated as an S-rank hunter. It was his public debut, so to speak.

The man had defeated the fearsome Ant King as his minions swept away the endless hordes of ants. In the same way sports fans poured out into the streets after a match, people who watched the broadcast gathered online.

↳Wow...I don't know what to say...

↳I'm pretty sure it's impossible to make that many minions, no?

↳My cancer of ten years was cured after watching Hunter Sung's minions attack those beasts.

↳Guess your cancer wasn't that serious if you lasted ten years?

↳Amazing. You were incredible.

↳I lost my parents on Jeju Island four years ago. Hunter Sung probably

won't see this, but...

Since the raid had been the talk of the town, it flooded all the online forums, and Jinwoo's name was brought up in every conversation.

In particular, fans who kept close tabs on hunters passionately debated the extent of Jinwoo's abilities.

↳At this point, can't he be considered a national-level hunter?

↳Nah, I don't think so. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

↳Why not? He cleared an S-rank dungeon pretty much by himself, and he's obviously way stronger than the other S-rank hunters.

↳But Hunter Sung doesn't have much experience yet. If he's actually that talented, he'll gain recognition in due time.

↳In any case, he's so freaking cool.

↳I heard E ranks weren't that different than normal people, so how did he get so powerful all of a sudden?

↳Is Hunter Sung a reawakened being?

↳Most people don't realize that Jinwoo is a reawakened being 'cause he asked for his information to stay confidential, so...

Of course, some people weren't all too happy with him.

↳But wait... Wouldn't Hunter Min still be alive if Hunter Sung had joined the raid from the start?

↳Why did he appear in the middle after he said he wouldn't get involved?

↳Looks like OP didn't read the official statement from the association.

↳What statement? Link pls.

The statement offered the following reason: Although Jinwoo was an official S-rank hunter, he had no previous experience with high-rank dungeons, so the

association had decided to keep him nearby in case of emergency and insert him as needed, rather than making him part of the official raid team.

Although this statement from the association was a rush job, it was good enough to assuage the public.

This is all I can do for Hunter Sung.

With this quick response, President Go managed to both protect Jinwoo's privacy and shield him from any blame. While some criticized the association's incompetence for not recognizing Jinwoo's abilities, none of the backlash was directed at Jinwoo himself.

Instead, Jinwoo's reputation increased. As far as the public knew, he'd jumped into the fray without a single complaint even when the Korean team was facing annihilation and the Japanese team, who was supposed to buy them time, had withdrawn.

↳ If I were him, I would've been too scared to go in there even if they tried to force me. Who'd willingly go in there knowing other S ranks were dying?

↳ Same.

↳ How did he persuade himself to do it?

↳ Jinwoo Sung is pretty much the paragon of hunters, don't you think?

↳ All the bastards who called him out for not joining the raid need to check themselves.

↳ LMAO yeah, don't talk shit about people if you don't know the full story.

Despite having applied to seal his records, Jinwoo was taken aback at having unexpectedly become the most famous hunter in South Korea because of this raid.

* * *

Two days later, an army unit and several hunters landed on Jeju Island in order to retrieve Byunggu Min's body.

Even though the Knights Guild of the Yeongnam area was a top-five guild, it wasn't able to participate in the raid because it lacked S-rank hunters. Thanks to them volunteering for this mission in order to give their reputation a much-needed boost, things were progressing smoothly.

The specially trained soldiers hesitated as the hunters led the way.

"C'mon, keep up."

"We told you, we don't sense any mana. Seriously, you don't believe us?"

The hunters walked far ahead of the soldiers, waving at them to hurry along. The soldiers finally followed them with extreme caution. Though frustrating for the hunters, the soldiers' trepidation was understandable.

Ordinary people couldn't detect mana, nor could they defend themselves against magic beasts. An abundance of caution was all they had at their disposal.

"Tsk." The guild master of the Knights Guild clicked his tongue as he scanned their surroundings with his hands on his hips.

Ooh...

His jaw hit the ground.

The closer they got to the ant cave, the more dead ants they saw littering the ground. Corpses were even piled up in hills in some places.

The vice master of the guild, who was also a close friend and longtime colleague, shook his head.

"Boss...do you see this? Can you believe one hunter did all this on his own?"

"....."

The Knights Guild had participated in the third Jeju mission, so they knew firsthand how terrifying the ants were.

"To see those creepy-crawlies in this state..."

"Yeah...that dude, Jinwoo Sung or whatever his name is, is definitely on another level."

The vice master continued to marvel.

“How was he able to exterminate every single ant in an area this large?”

“Right?”

The elite members of the Knights Guild had their fair share of experience with magic beasts, yet they were amazed by what they saw. They continued to be impressed as they made their way to the entrance of the ant tunnels.

“Boss, is that it?”

“Yeah.”

The hunters stopped just outside the entrance to the ant cave and waited for the soldiers to catch up. The guild master lit a cigarette, since he had nothing else to do to pass the time. Likewise, the vice master also raised a cigarette to his lips.

However...

Tup.

The guild master frowned as he watched the cigarette fall from the vice master’s lips.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

“B-boss!” The vice master urgently tapped the guild master’s shoulder and pointed straight ahead. The guild master finally sensed something wasn’t right and turned around.

“Whoa!”

A human’s shadow was visible at the entrance to the caves.

The shocked guild master raised his voice.

“Y-you... Who are you?”

* * *

Jongsu Park, the guild master of the Knights Guild, couldn’t believe what he was seeing. A seemingly normal foreign male walked out of the entrance to the ants’ cave. But that wasn’t possible.

This mission is top secret, isn’t it?

The ground was covered with the highest-quality essence stones. The association had decided to delay announcing the end of the mission until they figured out a way to prevent a mad rush to collect them. Therefore, very few people knew that there were no longer any magic beasts on the island.

Only the association, the soldiers, and...

And the one who'd exterminated the beasts, Jinwoo Sung.

But Jongsu was willing to bet every earthly possession he owned that the man standing in there wasn't Jinwoo. How could he forget Jinwoo's face? He was the most talked-about hunter in Korea right now, and his name was on the very top of the Knights Guild's recruitment wish list.

Jongsu addressed the figure again. "I asked who you are. What were you doing in there?"

Jongsu wasn't sure if the man couldn't understand him or simply didn't want to respond, but the only answer he received was a smile.

Yoontae Jung, the vice master of the Knights Guild, inched closer to Jongsu and narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"Boss, are you sure that's a human?"

"I—I don't know."

They were certain he was neither a hunter nor a magic beast, since they couldn't sense any magic power coming from him, but...the man gave off a weird aura. Yoontae was usually one to punch first and ask questions later, but the ominous energy emanating from the stranger gave him pause.

However, unlike the hunters, the soldiers had no way to perceive mana.

Ch-chk, ch-chk!

As soon as they noticed the man, the soldiers cocked their guns. Worried they might kill someone, Jongsu quickly stopped them.

"Hey! Don't shoot! He isn't a magic beast!"

"Then...is he human?"

"That's... Probably." Jongsu nodded, but his expression was uncertain.

If he isn't a magic beast, then he should be human.

With his limited knowledge, that was the only conclusion he could draw.

The commander of the army unit nodded shortly. "Understood. We'll handle it from here."

"Pardon? Aren't you guys just here to collect Hunter Min's body?"

"We also have orders to supervise the situation on Jeju Island."

Jongsu nodded and withdrew. If an opponent wasn't a hunter or a magic beast, there was no need for the Knights Guild to interfere. Jongsu thought it would be best to stand down, observe, and not get involved.

The commander shouted at the man. "You have entered a restricted area. If you do not follow our instructions, we will open fire."

"....."

The man's smile didn't budge.

Gulp!

The soldiers swallowed hard.

Should we shoot?

Considering they'd never fired a gun at a human before, their reactions made sense. The hunters were tense as well. They were starting to think that the strange man might be hiding something, since he just stood there grinning.

The man then put his hands in his pants pockets.

Is...he really human?

How could a person be so relaxed with so many guns trained on him?

Jongsu's expression turned grave.

Ch-chk, ch-chk!

Not being able to see the man's hands was making the soldiers tense up even more.

"Don't fire! Don't fire! Not yet!" A thick vein strained on the commander's neck as he yelled at his men.

But then...

“Commander!” A soldier’s shout had the commander turning his attention back to the mystery man just in time to see him opening his mouth.

“.....?”

He spoke a language they couldn’t understand. Not only that, but his voice and pronunciation sounded like he was speaking something otherworldly.

“Huh?”

“What’s he saying?”

The soldiers were unsure of what was going on, because they’d never experienced this before, but Jongsu stuttered.

“Th-the language of magic beasts?”

Hunters sometimes encountered intelligent magic beasts in high-rank dungeons. The man spoke in a similar language as them.

“Then that thing is—”

Before the commander could finish his sentence, the foreign man took his hands out of his pockets.

Blam!

An ear-piercing sound reverberated through the air. A well-trained special-forces soldier had reflexively pulled the trigger at the man’s suspicious movements.

Ack!

The startled commander spun toward the man. The bullet hit him in the forehead and fell to the ground uselessly. The man’s smile had vanished.

“M-magic beast!”

“It’s not human!”

The shouting didn’t last long. As soon as the man’s eyes glowed red, hunters and soldiers alike felt a tightening in their chest.

“Ah, ahhh!”

“Argh...”

But then...

Snap!

At the sound of fingers snapping, the humans went limp and collapsed to the ground like marionettes whose strings had been cut.

That wasn't the man's doing. He turned around to address someone else.

“What are you doing?”

A shorter middle-aged man appeared behind him.

“There's no need to cause trouble. I just put them to sleep.”

This new man also spoke in the otherworldly tongue.

“...You're right.”

The first stranger acquiesced, though he seemed disappointed. His middle-aged companion stared into the cavern.

“Did you check?”

The first man nodded. “It's his power for sure.”

“How odd.” The middle-aged fellow looked at the unconscious hunters. “I don't know why he's helping the humans.”

“Who knows what he's thinking. If you're so curious, why don't you go ask him yourself?”

“...No, thank you.” The middle-aged man shook his head. “The hunting will start as planned. Nothing has changed.”

“Got it.”

The elder of the pair lightly twirled his hand, and a black hole, a gate, big enough for a single person appeared in midair.

“Oh, right.”

The middle-aged man briefly looked back as his acquaintance continued.

“It looks like one of them is here.”

“In Korea?”

“How about getting rid of that one first, since we’re already here?”

The elder man narrowed his eyes. Soon, the information the first had mentioned flowed into his mind, but he was unwilling to follow his companion’s suggestion.

“I think...we should let him handle this area.”

“Are you saying you don’t want to get involved?”

“I guess you can say that. Think what you want.”

The middle-aged man’s voice followed him through the gate, and it closed behind him.

Vmm...

After making sure the gate was completely gone, the remaining stranger mumbled, “Coward...”

He looked at the humans lying helplessly on the ground. They’d wake up soon.

Hmph.

The man snorted and reached a hand toward the humans.

.....

He quietly retracted his hand. “Well, I guess there’s no need to cause trouble.”

The enigmatic figure soon disappeared through another gate.

* * *

Later that night, Jinwoo sat on the floor in his bedroom inspecting a dagger. It was the Demon Monarch’s Dagger, which had performed excellently during the battle against the Ant King.

[ITEM: DEMON MONARCH’S DAGGER]

Acquisition Difficulty: S

Category: Dagger

Attack Power +220

A dagger acquired from Balan the Demon Monarch. When you use both Demon Monarch's Daggers together, the set buff will be applied.

Set Buff: Two in One: Extra attack power equal to the current strength stat will be applied to each dagger.

The attack power and extra buff were incredible. Jinwoo reread the dagger's information screen multiple times. His reaction was understandable, as his former weapon of choice, the A-rank Barca's Dagger, had an attack power of only 110.

Jinwoo searched the shop but was unable to find another S-rank dagger with attack power over 200. To add to that, he was very pleased that his strength stat would be added on to the attack power when he used both daggers together. His strength had already surpassed 200 and was going on 250, so to have that amount of power tacked on?

At a rough estimation, the attack power of the Demon Monarch's Daggers would be four times higher than Barca's Dagger.

No wonder they felt so great to use.

Other hunters would go crazy over these daggers if they knew what they could do.

And what about the sword?

[ITEM: DEMON MONARCH'S SWORD]

Acquisition Difficulty: S

Category: Sword

Attack Power +350

This sword contains the power of Balan the Demon Monarch. Whenever you swing the sword, Buff: Storm of White Lightning will be applied.

Buff: Storm of White Lightning: Stirs up a storm with never-ending lightning in a certain area.

Considering the logistics of a sword versus a dagger, it was a given that the sword would have a higher attack power than a single dagger. However, what was unusual was the sword's buff.

I can attack a wide area just by swinging it around?

It would be a very useful weapon when dealing with multiple enemies. In fact, Jinwoo still got goose bumps when he remembered how difficult the sword had been for his shadow soldiers to deal with. Its strength now wasn't comparable to Balan's actual magic, but it was still very impressive.

If it wasn't for my dagger-related skills, I'd use the sword more...

Jinwoo was about to swing the sword in his room but stopped himself in time.

.....

Despite the late hour, having lightning strike in the next room would wake anyone, and he didn't want to give his mother more reasons to be stressed.

He gently lowered the sword.

Speaking of, that's a huge relief.

His mother hadn't objected to his job. When he'd returned home, Jinwoo had spilled everything to his mother except for details regarding the system. He told her that he'd become an S-rank hunter after being reawakened by chance and that he wanted to continue working as a hunter.

She had been worried at first but eventually gave Jinwoo her blessing.

"I'd like for you to do whatever you want to do, Jinwoo."

Her one condition was to not overdo it.

Though if a situation ever arises that I can't easily handle...

Jinwoo shook his head to stop any dark thoughts.

Then he remembered something his mother had said.

"Is that why he appeared?"

“Who?”

“I heard your father’s voice when I was asleep in the hospital.”

“What did he say?”

“That’s...”

She then explained that she had never heard anyone’s voice in her dreams before then, nor had she heard any after.

I guess Mom still misses Dad.

Despite that, she hadn’t stopped her son from becoming a hunter because she trusted him. And so Jinwoo had no intention whatsoever of disappointing his mother.

Survival—that was most important to Jinwoo. He’d gotten to where he was today, despite all the setbacks, because he’d never given up.

...Okay.

There was nothing stopping him from raiding dungeons now that he had his mother’s full support. He could establish a guild and quickly level up by sweeping all the high-rank dungeons.

Jinwoo couldn’t wait.

And I have another reason to level up.

Vmmm...

Jinwoo summoned Igris, the shadow soldier who had been with him the longest.

Plus...

He was also the only knight-rank soldier provided directly by the system. In other words, Igris was closely linked to the system, more than any other soldier.

“You’ll be able to talk to me once you rank up, right?”

Jinwoo had so many things he wanted to ask Igris.

Of course, he didn’t receive an answer to his question.

“.....” Igris was silent as usual. If silence were a sound, Igris would be the

noisiest soldier in the world.

Jinwoo chuckled and picked up the Demon Monarch's weapons.

Inventory.

As he stored his weapons away, something sparkling caught his eye.

...What's that?

Jinwoo's eyes widened. One of the items in the inventory was gleaming.

8
AN UNEXPECTED
PROPOSAL



8

AN UNEXPECTED PROPOSAL

It was a black key.

The black key from the cursed mystery box was shining as if beckoning to him. Jinwoo stared incredulously for a moment before carefully setting down his weapons, reaching a hand out, and grasping for it.

.....

When he opened his hand, there it was.

[ITEM: CARTENON TEMPLE'S KEY]

Acquisition Difficulty: ??

Category: Key

The required conditions have been fulfilled.

This key unlocks the entrance to the Cartenon Temple. You can use it at the designated gate.

The location of the designated gate will be revealed after the allotted time passes.

Remaining Time: 417:06:52

He'd never seen an item description like this before.

The Cartenon Temple?

Jinwoo cocked his head. How strange... He'd never heard of it before, but it sounded familiar.

No, I definitely know that name.

Jinwoo racked his brain until his eyes shot open.

The double dungeon!

The old temple located at the end of the double dungeon... The temple and the stone statues... The stone slate held by one of them... Everything was coming back to him.

That's it...

It was as if he could faintly hear Mr. Song's voice reading aloud the first sentence on the stone slate.

"The commandments of the Cartenon Temple."

The slate had named the place with those awful statues as the Cartenon Temple. The name of the temple matching the one indicated in the black key's item description couldn't be a mere coincidence.

This could mean only one thing.

Will this key let me go back?

Jinwoo was shaken. He felt goose bumps everywhere as the hazy memories came more and more into focus until they finally took shape in his mind.

It can't be...

No, it had to be. The system was calling to Jinwoo once again, leading him back to the place where it all began. The item had started sparkling, as if the system was concerned Jinwoo wouldn't spare a glance at it. Plus, it would indicate quite plainly where the item was to be used.

No matter how he interpreted it, the system was reaching out to him. The question was, why now?

Maybe it's related to the Demon's Castle quests?

He had received the black key after choosing the cursed mystery box as a reward from the Collect Demon Souls (1) quest, so he looked into the mystery reward he'd received for the completion of the Collect Demon Souls (2) quest.

Title.

His newly acquired title and its information popped up with a *ping!*

[Title: Demon Hunter]

The required conditions have not been fulfilled.

Jinwoo had been hoping the description was updated, but nothing had changed since the first time he'd taken a look.

I guess this isn't it.

Next, he checked the third Demon Monarch's accessory that completed the set.

[ITEM: DEMON MONARCH'S RING]

Acquisition Difficulty: S

Category: Accessories

Agility +20, Intelligence +20

There is a set buff that will be revealed when worn with Demon Monarch's Earrings and Demon Monarch's Necklace.

Set Buff 1. All stats +5

Set Buff 2. All stats +10

He carefully reviewed everything just in case there was a hidden third set buff, but that wasn't it, either.

Then...

There was only one other possibility. Jinwoo's eyes moved toward the information above his title.

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Level: 100]

[Job: Shadow Monarch]

[Title:]

His eyes stopped at the line indicating his level. He had just barely made it to level 100 by slaying all the ants and crushing the eggs and pupae on Jeju Island.

That's probably the required condition that the key mentioned.

That appeared to be the most plausible explanation.

Jinwoo could easily summon an item from the inventory with his mind after manually storing it the first time. Therefore, he rarely called up and laid eyes on the inventory unless he received a new item. That was why he'd only discovered the change in the key just now, even though it had already been a few days since leveling up. If he hadn't decided to organize the inventory today, since he'd already taken out some weapons anyway, it was likely that he wouldn't have discovered the key for some time.

But better late than never.

Let's see, 417 hours is about seventeen days... That leaves a little over two weeks.

Thus far, the system had always delivered on its promises, so the gate's exact location would definitely be revealed then.

I should be getting ready now...

The passing thought startled Jinwoo.

Wait a minute... Am I seriously considering going back to that place?

Ha-ha!

Jinwoo laughed in spite of himself. While it was true that the party had consisted of low-rank hunters, it was also true that the majority of them had died during the raid. Jinwoo himself had experienced several near-death incidents as well.

Heck, I actually lost a leg.

The memory haunted him to this day. It gave him chills thinking about the sight of blood where his lower leg should've been.

And yet, anticipation flared in his eyes.

I'm not the same person I was then.

He felt more confident now. Or rather, he felt an odd excitement at the possibility of commanding the shadows of the stone statues or the colossus.

Besides, he didn't know what kind of penalty he'd receive for not answering

the system's call. Based on his experiences with the first penalty quest and the urgent quests, he knew full well that the system could be both his enemy and his ally based on whichever decision he made.

The hand holding the key grew sweaty.

Gulp.

Jinwoo swallowed nervously, then shook his head.

...Don't get too worked up.

He had to keep calm. He waited for his heart to slow and took deep breaths before slowly opening his eyes.

"Okay."

If the system had some business with him, this could be another opportunity. The cursed mystery box...wasn't it supposed to give Jinwoo something he needed?

I should still ready myself to some extent.

He'd do the minimum amount of preparation.

As Jinwoo thought about his to-do list, he remembered something he'd been putting off: establishing his guild. Raiding gates to raise the levels of his soldiers would be easier with a guild, and since Jinho was so passionate about starting one, Jinwoo had left everything to him up until now.

I wonder how things are going there.

Jinwoo moved to call Jinho but set his phone down after checking the time. It was two o'clock in the morning.

It's too late now...

He had somewhere to be later today anyway, so he might as well visit Jinho in person.

I'll stop by the office tomorrow.

* * *

Jinho's glare deepened. He scanned the computer screen with a sharp gaze like that of a hawk trained on its prey. The fire in his eyes burned bright.

You're not getting away with trying to harm the boss's reputation!

Jinho swiftly took screenshots of the problematic posts and comments and then filled in forms to report the contents. He moved quickly and efficiently, as if he'd done this many times before.

Taka-taka-tak.

"Whew!" He lifted his hands from the keyboard and wiped the sweat off his brow.

Yet another case settled. He'd rooted out one more seed of malice who was bad-mouthing his boss.

Jinwoo was the face and light of the guild. Maligning or spreading misinformation about him was absolutely unforgivable. Plus, Jinho couldn't let them get away with this for the guild's sake as well.

What was the guild to Jinho? It was the guild of which he was going to be the vice president. Therefore, what he was doing wasn't out of personal offense but rather as part of his job that would soon be established.

When he thought about it, however, Jinho realized that this guild still had no name. This had to be remedied immediately, and since Jinwoo hadn't said anything about it, Jinho decided to think up something suitable.

Hmm...

What about the SungYoo Guild, taking the Sung from Jinwoo Sung and the Yoo from Jinho Yoo?

Jinho shook his head.

Not a bad idea, but it sounds a bit...

YooSung was more pleasing to the ear, but he couldn't very well put his name before Jinwoo's.

I need to discuss this with him.

It had been two days since they'd moved into this office. While the world was obsessing over Jinwoo following the Jeju Island raid, Jinho was clocking in a lot of time alone in the office.

It'd be better to use the second parts of our first names and make it the WooHo Guild...

“Why so serious?”

“Eep!” Startled, Jinho jumped out of his seat. He spun around to find Jinwoo standing beside him. “B-boss!”

Jinwoo raised an eyebrow, not understanding why Jinho was so skittish.

Jinho patted his chest to calm down.

When he conceals his presence, I can't sense him even when he's standing right next to me...

Jinho hadn't necessarily been lost in thought, but he still hadn't heard a thing. Jinwoo's stealth was improving by the day.

Feeling a little embarrassed at his overreaction, Jinho scratched the back of his head. “When did you get here, boss?”

“Just now.”

Jinwoo answered casually and turned to look at the computer screen, but Jinho quickly stood in front of the monitor to block his view.

“You don't need to worry about those jerks. I'll take care of them, boss.”

Jinwoo looked at Jinho's earnest face in disbelief. “...That was you?”

Jinwoo had heard there was someone threatening to sue people if they posted hate comments about him online. Who knew that someone would be so close to him?

Jinho blushed at having accidentally busted himself. “Geez, boss...I'm just doing what's necessary, y'know?”

Jinwoo couldn't help but chuckle at the twinkle in Jinho's eyes that were eagerly awaiting Jinwoo's praise.

“All right, good job.”

Jinho interpreted Jinwoo's smile to be one of satisfaction, so he resolved to work even harder for him. As he did...

“Hmm? Did you have somewhere to be today, boss?” Jinho noticed that the other hunter wasn’t dressed in his usual clothes.

Jinwoo answered nonchalantly. “I have an errand to run.”

“I see...”

Jinho internally marveled at the sight. Jinwoo usually preferred casual attire he could easily move around in, so the sight of him decked out in a black suit and tie was both foreign and surprising.

Jinwoo glanced at his watch, not bothering to elaborate further.

It’s already this late...

He looked up and asked, “I don’t need to bring anything with me for the guild master’s license, right?”

“That’s right, boss! You’ll get the license after a simple test at the association.”

“Cool.”

Ah, so Jinwoo was going to the association?

That outfit’s a bit much just for a visit to the association, though.

Jinho, who was trying to guess Jinwoo’s destination, soon arrived at a logical conclusion.

Since he’s a celebrity now, he has to pay attention to what he’s wearing.

Fame could be both great and tiring. Jinho knew quite a few public figures personally, so he could sympathize with the unseen burden that many of them carried.

Regardless of what Jinho was thinking, Jinwoo pointed at the desk that lay out of his reach.

“I’ll be taking the van.”

He indicated the key.

“Please feel free, boss.”

Jinho made to grab the key for him but then watched in awe as it flew into

the other man's hand on its own.

"Boss, what was—?"

Jinwoo cut him off. "A skill."

"....."

Jinho was at a loss for words. At this point, Jinwoo could start flying around the room, and Jinho wouldn't find it odd.

Is there anything he can't do?

As each layer of the onion that was Jinwoo was peeled back, there was more and more to be impressed about.

Hang on, there's no time for this.

He came back down to reality. There were a few things he'd wanted to ask Jinwoo, and since he was in the office, this was a good chance. Jinwoo could see that Jinho had something to say, so he paused.

"Yes?"

"I received a mountain of applications for the job posting I uploaded yesterday, so I've made a list—"

"Oh. Let's talk about that when I get back."

Jinwoo was already cutting it close. Because Jinwoo was obviously in a rush, Jinho hurriedly continued.

"Oh, boss, then have you decided on a name for our guild?"

This was definitely a priority. They needed a name for the job posting and any other official orders of business.

I wonder if he already has a name in mind.

Jinho fidgeted as he waited for Jinwoo's answer. He had a few suggestions ready in case Jinwoo had trouble coming up with something.

SungYoo, JinJin, WooHo... I hope he likes at least one of those.

While Jinho looked on expectantly, a grin spread across Jinwoo's face as an idea popped into his mind.

“How about SoloPlay Guild?”

“What?”

Jinho stared at the older man. Was he supposed to laugh here? It didn't look like Jinwoo was joking, though.

With that, Jinwoo started to head out. Perhaps he hadn't been expecting much of a reaction from Jinho anyway.

“Okay, see you.”

Jinho watched him exit the office.

...I guess there actually are things he can't do.

The boss was only human, after all. While he was a bit worried that their guild name might actually be SoloPlay, Jinho was also somewhat comforted by this proof that Jinwoo wasn't perfect.

* * *

Jinwoo arrived at the funeral of Hunter Byunggu Min.

It was originally going to be held in private for family members only, but it was made open to the public because tons of people had expressed the wish to pay their respects. A huge number of the public visited the funeral parlor to honor Hunter Min's sacrifice, including Jinwoo.

Whoa, is that...?

Oh! Isn't that man Hunter Sung?

It's really him.

Murmur, murmur.

People who recognized Jinwoo started whispering among themselves.

Jinwoo normally didn't care about being stared at, and he didn't mind being recognized as long as no one bothered him. What others were saying about him was none of his concern.

However...

They need to remember where they are and why they're here.

Jinwoo frowned.

Wasn't this about remembering Hunter Min's sacrifice? It was supposed to be a solemn occasion, and he didn't want it disrupted because of him.

Jinwoo released a small amount, a tiny fraction of his magic power for a short period of time.

.....!

That was more than enough. The air grew heavy, and the room fell silent. The mourners were made to be mindful of every breath they took.

“.....”

“.....”

Everyone's mouths simultaneously snapped shut, and the flurry of conversation gave way to silence.

Good.

Satisfied with the atmosphere he'd created with his display of power, Jinwoo continued on his way, only to be blocked by a middle-aged woman who wasn't quite of age to be called a grandmother.

It was Hunter Byunggu Min's mother.

The murmurs started up again seeing the two of them standing face-to-face.

Uh-oh...

Is she going to yell at him and kick him out?

The mourners' concerns were unfounded for one simple reason.

“You came, Hunter Sung.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Byunggu's mother herself had been the one to earnestly request Jinwoo's attendance.

“I contacted you because there was something I wanted to tell you in person. I hope it wasn't too much trouble.”

“No, not at all.”

“I heard that you were the one who got rid of all the magic beasts on the island so my son’s body could be retrieved.”

She paused and looked at Jinwoo as if waiting for confirmation of the fact.

.....

Jinwoo had eliminated the ants from Jeju Island for a number of reasons, but it was certainly true that he hadn’t felt right letting Hunter Min’s body rot in the deepest recesses of that cave, so he nodded.

“Yes.”

“Thanks to you, my son isn’t sleeping in some cold, dark place...”

Hunter Min’s mother was unable to hold back her tears any longer.

“Because of you, I was at least able to see my son one more time. Thank you so, so much, Hunter Sung.”

Were there any words that could comfort a parent who had lost their child?

Relatives started to gently guide Hunter Min’s sobbing mother farther inside as Jinwoo stood in mournful silence. Byunggu’s mother bowed to him several times to relay her gratitude as she was led away, propped up by the others.

.....

Her face reminded Jinwoo of his own mother’s expression when they’d received the call ten years ago that his father had gone missing in a gate. His chest tightened.

At least...

Just as his father’s sacrifice had saved many of his colleagues, Byunggu Min’s death had not been in vain. If not for his devoted healing, the other hunters wouldn’t have been able to survive the ant cave. And even after death, Hunter Min’s power had saved another’s life.

His shadow had appeared relieved when the color returned to Hunter Haein Cha’s face. Jinwoo could tell that he’d genuinely cared for his colleagues.

Coincidentally, on his way to place a flower in front of Hunter Min’s funeral portrait, Jinwoo spotted Haein in the distance. She blanched when they made

eye contact.

Looks like everyone came together.

Haein was surrounded by the other hunters from the Korean raid team, who all nodded at Jinwoo, but Haein looked like she wasn't sure how to act in front of him.

So she can make those kinds of faces, too?

Jinwoo had never seen Haein look anything but expressionless, but this served as a reminder that one should never judge a book by its cover.

He turned to regard Hunter Min's portrait. Byunggu was smiling brightly like he didn't have a care in the world. Jinwoo placed his flower and closed his eyes for a brief moment.

May you rest in peace.

After saying a prayer for Hunter Min, Jinwoo turned to see a familiar person approaching him.

"Hunter Sung."

The deep voice belonged to President Go.

"Sir."

"It's good to see you here. I've been meaning to contact you."

"Really?"

It was obvious why the association would call on a hunter. Jinwoo got his hopes up, thinking he might have an opportunity to level up, but President Go unfortunately shook his head and laughed gently.

"It's not that."

"Oh, I see."

What a letdown. Jinwoo pursed his lips in disappointment.

"I'd like a moment of your time. Is that okay?"

Jinwoo agreed, since that fit with his plans anyway. "I have business to take care of at the association, so why don't we talk there?"

“You have business at the association...? What kind of business?”

“I need a guild master’s license.”

“Excuse me?” The confusion on President Go’s face was obvious. “Why would you need a guild master’s license when you have an S-rank hunter’s license?”

“Can S-rank hunters start a guild without a guild master’s license?”

“That’s right.” President Go gave a kind smile. “If you’d like to form a guild, please give the association a call. We’ll take care of the rest.”

“.....”

Jinwoo had underestimated the advantages of being an S-rank hunter. He had yet to look into the matter, since he’d never dreamed it would have anything to do with him. This was news to him, so he was slightly taken aback at first.

I should really investigate the perks.

Considering his direct line to President Go, it looked like Jinwoo would be able to form a guild quickly as long as he fulfilled the requirements. Connections really were important to success in life. Most people would be hard-pressed to meet President Go even once, and here Jinwoo was, able to count on him as a reliable supporter.

President Go continued. “What I’d like to find out won’t take too long, so we can do it here.”

Jinwoo nodded in understanding.

President Go immediately asked, “Did you cast some kind of a barrier spell on Jeju Island?”

“What do you mean?”

What barrier spell? Had something happened after he finished off the ants and left?

President Go calmly explained the situation. “During the process of retrieving Hunter Min’s body, there was an incident that caused all the soldiers and hunters to pass out. Well, it’d be more accurate to say they fell asleep.”

Multiple people had fallen asleep in the same place at the same time?

Jinwoo raised an eyebrow.

It sounds like an extraordinary wide-area magic spell.

It was similar to how his shadow soldiers had been simultaneously stunned by Balan the Demon Monarch's lightning. The problem was, these weren't ordinary hunters.

"Didn't the elite members of the Knights Guild go to Jeju Island?"

President Go answered with a nod. "It was a mixed team of powerful A-rank hunters and B-rank hunters who are close to A rank."

Someone had been able to put more than ten powerful hunters to sleep. Even an S-rank mage hunter wouldn't dare consider such a thing, let alone attempt it.

"That's why I'm asking you, Hunter Sung. Just in case you forgot that you cast a barrier spell."

It was clear that President Go and the Hunter's Association rated Jinwoo's power highly. But not only were barriers not in Jinwoo's wheelhouse, he'd never forget casting that kind of frightening magic.

Jinwoo shook his head. "No, I've never done that."

"I see... That's what I thought."

President Go looked deeply concerned. His best hope of getting to the bottom of this mystery had been dashed.

"What did the hunters say about it?"

"The thing is..." President Go struggled to find the right words. "Neither the soldiers nor the hunters can remember the events leading up to when they lost consciousness." Feeling helpless, he added, "Actually, we haven't been able to determine whether they truly were victims of magic."

"....."

There would've been a possibility of a human-made weapon like sleeping gas if it were just the soldiers, but there had to be more to it if A-rank hunters were also affected.

Could it have been some kind of trap the ants set?

Jinwoo wanted to summon Beru immediately to ask him.

.....

If he did, though, the funeral could very well become the scene of a bloody battle, since there were easily ten high-rank hunters present in his field of view alone. Jinwoo wasn't worried about Beru; he was more concerned about the hunters who would try to fight him.

Just then, a young man, presumably an employee of the association, walked up to President Go and whispered something to him. President Go regretfully turned to Jinwoo.

"My guest has arrived earlier than expected, so I must leave now. Thank you for your time."

"Of course."

After a brief good-bye, the president and the employee hurriedly left.

Since he no longer needed to go to the association, Jinwoo headed to the van to drive home, but...

Hmm?

He sensed a strange presence following him. He cocked his head.

Don't people usually try not to get caught when they tail someone?

Besides, the average person wouldn't even think of pursuing an S-rank hunter.

Tok, tok.

He couldn't hear any kind of camera equipment, so it couldn't be paparazzi, which made sense, since whoever it was didn't seem to be trying to hide their presence anyway.

Jinwoo wondered how long this person would follow him, so he wordlessly meandered over to the van. Of course, his tail continued trailing after him.

Oh man...

Jinwoo thought the whole situation was absurd. He couldn't take someone this careless that seriously. But just as he reached for the car door...

"Are you Mr. Jinwoo Sung?"

A voice came from behind him. Jinwoo turned, amused that the stranger was finally showing their true intentions.

"Yes, that's right."

He paused in surprise as he laid eyes on the other person.

A foreigner?

He hadn't expected this, as the speaker's Korean pronunciation was impeccable. Standing before him was a young man of Western descent, wearing a sharp, fashionable suit. His sunny smile shone as brightly as his blond hair.

"This is me."

He took a business card out of his inside jacket pocket and handed it to Jinwoo. His name, phone number, and place of employment were written in a large font.

[Hunter Command Center of America, Adam White, Senior Agent]

Hunter Command Center?

What did an elite agent from the most powerful organization in the United States want with Jinwoo? Though there could be only one reason for them to approach Jinwoo, wasn't there?

When Jinwoo looked up from the card, Adam introduced himself in a clear voice.

"Please just call me Adam, Hunter Sung."

Adam White... Jinwoo raked his gaze over the young American who'd revealed himself to be an employee of the Hunter Command Center.

.....

He could tell they were interested in him by the look in Adam's eyes. The United States was widely known for luring hunters from around the world with their enormous financial power. So Jinwoo fully thought Adam was going to

invite him to his country.

However, what Adam said next was completely unexpected.

“I have some information I would like to divulge to you.”

“Information...?”

“It’s the kind of intel only we, the Hunter Command Center, can provide.”

Jinwoo had to wonder why this man would want to reveal top secret data to a foreigner he’d never met before.

“Why give me such important information?”

Adam smiled at Jinwoo’s question. “When it comes to certain special people, there are benefits we can reap even in simple acts like providing information.”

Special people... So Jinwoo was one of these “special people” now.

Jinwoo’s curiosity was piqued. “I’m listening.”

“That’s all I’m allowed to say. Our assistant director will tell you the rest.”

The assistant director of the Hunter Command Center, a man who held more influence than the ministers of most governments, was here in Korea?

I guess this is something huge.

Adam surmised that he had successfully hooked Jinwoo. He proceeded to tell Jinwoo his main reason for being here.

“His car is nearby. Would you like to meet the assistant director?”

It was entirely up to Jinwoo.

Information...

It would probably be one of two types: news that would benefit Jinwoo or a warning that someone was after him. But Jinwoo didn’t feel like he needed to urgently know either way.

If it was advantageous news, he would rather focus on the black key, and if it was a warning, he was confident he could destroy whoever was aiming for him.

On top of that...

I don't even know if I'll be able to trust the information that they give me in the first place...

It was also possible that the whole thing about tipping him off was a ruse in and of itself. What was the point of getting dragged around if he wasn't sure they had anything at all, much less something he needed?

He swiftly made a decision. "I'll think about it and get back to you."

".....!"

Adam was shocked, looking like someone had just slapped him.

No way. The assistant director of the Hunter Command Center himself has come all the way to Korea to give him confidential information, but he just ignores it and walks away?

He realized Jinwoo might not be bluffing when the Korean man opened the van door. Adam broke out in a cold sweat. He didn't know when he'd get another opportunity to connect with Jinwoo or whether he'd get one at all.

Adam couldn't be sure if this was a ploy to get him to reveal their hand, but the fact remained that the Americans had more to lose if they let him go.

"Okay, see you."

As Jinwoo was about to get in the van, Adam called out desperately.

"P-please wait!"

Jinwoo spared him a glance, so he kept talking to hold Jinwoo's attention for as long as he could.

"Upgrader..."

"Upgrader?"

Adam resignedly explained. "Have you heard of the awakened being who can upgrade other awakened beings' abilities?"

He should've opened with this. Jinwoo realized that what Adam and the assistant director of the Hunter Command Center wanted to share with him was far more valuable than simple information.

An awakened being who can upgrade other awakened beings...

Jinwoo finally felt like hearing them out. He stepped away from the van and slammed the door shut.

Adam let out a long sigh of relief. “Whew...”

He then looked up to see Jinwoo already standing right in front of him.

“Oh geez!” Adam jumped back, startled.

Jinwoo asked him, “Where to?”

* * *

Skreeeeech.

The black sedan stopped in front of a famous luxury hotel.

“Here we are.”

Jinwoo noted that this was the same hotel that had been written on the note he’d gotten previously.

Jinho told me that an English-speaking foreigner was looking for me. Was it this guy?

Jinwoo followed the agent up to the room where the assistant director was waiting for him.

Michael Connor couldn’t hide his glee as soon as he recognized the Asian man behind his subordinate.

Yes!

The most difficult part of any negotiation was getting the other side to come to the table. If they showed up, that was half the battle won.

Michael offered Jinwoo a handshake with a bright smile on his face.

“I’m Michael Connor, assistant director of the Hunter Command Center.”

Adam translated Michael’s greeting into perfect Korean at the speed of light.

Jinwoo took the offered hand. “I’m Hunter Jinwoo Sung.”

After brief introductions, Jinwoo and Michael sat down on opposite sides of the table. Adam remained standing next to his boss.

“By any chance, have you met with any hunter-related personnel from other

countries?” Michael tried asking.

“No, I have not.”

Michael gave a satisfied smile at the answer he’d been looking for.

Naturally, no one is quicker on the draw than America.

A striker has to be faster than the other players to score a goal. Michael had no intention of wasting this head start they had over everyone else, especially since his boss had ordered him to do whatever it took to bring this hunter to the United States.

He didn’t bother to beat around the bush. “I’ll get straight to the point, Hunter Sung.”

With a determined look on his face, Michael slid the mound of files in front of him toward Jinwoo.

Shf...

He then continued. “The United States wants you, Hunter Sung.”

“And these are...?”

“Immigration documents. Normally, it would take a year or two to process them. However, your case is special.”

Michael held up an index finger.

“One second,” he declared in a confident voice. “Say yes, and in one second, you will be an American citizen. Of course, you wouldn’t be treated as an ordinary citizen but as one of the highest-level hunters in the country.”

“.....”

Everything Michael had said up to this point had been par for the course. But what Jinwoo really wanted was more information on the reawakened being known as the Upgrader.

Adam flinched and looked away when Jinwoo’s gaze fell on him. Jinwoo turned back to Michael.

“I came here because Agent White told me that I could get some information.”

Michael burst out laughing. “That’s not unrelated to what I’ve told you so far.”

“How so?”

“If you become an American citizen, our Upgrader can raise your abilities to a higher level.”

Upgrader... That seemed to be the literal power of this awakened being. Although he’d heard it from two people now, Jinwoo still couldn’t fully believe what they were saying.

Is there really an awakened being who can do such a thing?

He had to make sure. “Increasing someone’s abilities. Is that even possible?”

Jinwoo’s interest thrilled Michael. “Actually, that person is here with us.”

Jinwoo was already aware that there was another awakened being in the vicinity. A small amount of magic power was seeping into the room through the cracks of the closed door. Jinwoo had been wondering why someone with such weak levels of mana had been chosen as the bodyguard for the assistant director.

So Michael’s next order wasn’t entirely surprising.

“Please escort in Mrs. Sellner.”

Click.

As soon as he relayed his instructions, the door opened, and two agents ushered a middle-aged African American woman into the room. Jinwoo squinted at the peculiar energy coming from her.

.....

Her aura was certainly different from the typical reawakened being.

As the woman reached the table, one of the agents pulled out a chair for her. She slowly sat down on its edge, recognizing Jinwoo right away.

“You’re the man from the footage...”

Mrs. Sellner had already been briefed about Jinwoo, so Michael only needed to introduce them.

“This is Mrs. Norma Sellner. She’s the one and only awakened being in the entire world who can help reawakened beings surpass the set limits of their power.”

Mrs. Sellner nodded at Jinwoo, and he returned the greeting.

“Mrs. Sellner, please give Hunter Sung a brief explanation of your abilities.”

A playful smile appeared on her face as she noted the suspicion in Jinwoo’s eyes.

“I get that look a lot...” She leaned forward to stage-whisper to him. “But once I give them a taste, they all end up clinging to me soon enough.”

“Mrs. Sellner...”

She waved off Michael’s frown with a laugh.

“I know he’s an important person, Mr. Connor.” Norma smiled as she steadily continued her explanation. “As you know, Hunter Sung, all awakened beings have set limits to their power that they cannot surpass.”

That was why the ranks of awakened beings never changed unless they had a reawakening. Every hunter knew this basic fact.

“Mrs. Sellner, does that mean you can—?”

Even before Jinwoo finished his sentence, Norma answered him with the delight of a child picking up the strawberry she had been saving for last from on top of a cake.

“That’s right.”

Jinwoo’s eyes widened.

“I can make them increase their limits in three stages. I don’t know whether to call it a forced reawakening or simply increasing their latent power, though.”

What an incredible ability! What Norma had just revealed was a game changer that would blow the minds of every elite hunter the world over.

Jinwoo glanced at Michael, and the assistant director nodded.

“She speaks the truth. The catch is, only three to four people can receive this benefit each year because Mrs. Sellner requires an extensive break between

uses of her ability.”

“...How effective is it?”

“It’s different for everyone. But those who have completed all three stages have reported increases ranging from twenty to thirty percent.”

A whole 20 to 30 percent?! Jinwoo’s average stats were close to 250 now. If his ability points increased by that much, his average stats would easily go over 300. That was an insanely high number.

Assuming all of this was true, of course.

Does she cast a buff to increase abilities? Or does she increase the fixed level somehow?

Whichever it was, her ability was invaluable to hunters, which would mean a high demand for her services.

“If other people find out about her ability...”

Michael nodded. “That’s why Mrs. Sellner is with us.”

Norma had been troubled by Jinwoo’s exact concern, and that was why she’d joined the Hunter Command Center after much deliberation. She wanted to be able to use her power safely.

“We make sure that Mrs. Sellner is safe and well compensated, and in turn, she increases the abilities of hunters of our choosing. We’ve had this symbiotic relationship for some time now.”

With that, Michael wrapped up his explanation. It was time to get down to business.

“Mrs. Sellner’s ability is a gift we can give you, Hunter Sung.”

“A gift, you say?”

What could be a better gift for a hunter?

“If you become a hunter for the United States of America, you would be at the front of Mrs. Sellner’s queue. Plus, we’d act as a go-between for the guild of your choosing to ensure you get the best deal possible.”

This was a bargain too good for any hunter to pass up. Jinwoo now

understood why Dongsoo Hwang had made the bold choice of moving to the United States despite all the criticism he'd received from his fellow Koreans. The huge amount of money America had offered him had been a red herring to distract from his real reason for defecting. The average hunter would lose their mind over this, so imagine the strongest hunters being told they could enhance their abilities?

Who could say no to that?

However...

"Can you prove that Mrs. Sellner really has this kind of power?"

There was no evidence for their claims.

Norma jumped into the conversation. "There's no rush. I'm here to let you have the first bite."

Jinwoo finally realized the true meaning behind her earlier words.

Once she gives them a taste, they all end up clinging to her soon enough, huh?

Every hunter who was able to confirm the effect of her power expatriated to the United States without exception, just like she said. Her confidence wasn't unfounded.

"It's as she says. So would you like to expand your limits?" Michael offered.

"Without anything from me?"

"Consider this a preview, Mr. Hunter."

Norma lightly took Jinwoo's wrist. When Jinwoo looked at her, she gestured with a benign smile for him to come closer.

"Please look deeply into my eyes. That's the first step."

Were her claims real? Jinwoo decided to follow Norma's lead in order to confirm their purports.

The assistant director crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair as he watched them.

We did it. He's in!

Game, set, and match.

Michael noted that Jinwoo's cool demeanor had yet to change, but he figured that it wouldn't last. He was confident Jinwoo would be in touch with them once the first stage was complete. Heck, Jinwoo might sign the immigration papers on the spot if he happened to be impatient.

Michael's attention was now elsewhere.

I wonder what his limit is?

Michael uncrossed his arms and rubbed his chin. He gazed upon Jinwoo with curious eyes.

But that was when...

"Oh!" Norma inhaled sharply, her eyelids fluttering rapidly.

Norma Sellner. Usually referred to as Mrs. Sellner, she was a forty-six-year-old African American woman and the only person in the country with more security than the president of the United States of America. In other words, if the lives of both Mrs. Sellner and the president were in danger at the same time, the Hunter Command Center would rush to save her before they even considered saving the president.

How was this the case?

When the former director of the Hunter Command Center stepped down, he'd described Mrs. Sellner to the present director during their transfer of power as such.

"The United States will be the strongest nation of hunters in the world regardless of who the president is. However, without her, we'll have to be concerned about gates opening in the most vulnerable parts of the country."

And he was right. Because Norma attracted S-rank hunters from around the world, American citizens could sleep soundly at night knowing that wherever they lived in this large nation, they would be protected from high-rank dungeons.

Twenty-six of the top hunters in the world had already changed their citizenship because of her. Not only was that more hunters than any other

country but each was also the cream of the crop as selected by the Hunter Command Center.

Norma Sellner was the hidden guardian angel of America. No hunter would ever be more important or receive better treatment than she would. Her existence was of the highest confidentiality, so even the president of the United States couldn't meet with her easily.

And S-rank hunters who had the privilege of meeting her were ones who fit the Hunter Command Center's extremely strict standards. Those hunters were the special people Agent White had mentioned earlier.

"When it comes to certain special people, there are benefits we can reap even in simple acts like providing information."

Initially, most S-rank hunters, including Jinwoo, had no idea how incredible it was to be one of those special people, but they understood perfectly once Norma worked her magic. They would grasp who they'd been chosen by and what that truly meant for them!

One hunter had knelt before Norma, tears of joy streaming down his face, as he was overcome by the power flowing through his body. He was from Congo but became a United States citizen the very next day.

That's how it always goes.

So Michael Connor, the current assistant director of the Hunter Command Center, didn't suspect anything would be different with Jinwoo. He expected Jinwoo to scream out in ecstasy as the power welled up inside him and then cling to her for more. Honestly, there was no better way to describe it.

Michael had nothing but confidence.

However, the screaming this time came from an unexpected source.

"Ahhhhh!"

Norma, who had been peering into Jinwoo's eyes, fell off her chair, screaming like she'd seen something she shouldn't have.

The two agents guarding her immediately drew their guns and pointed them at Jinwoo.

“Stop! Are you crazy?!”

Michael yelled at the foolhardiness of the agents. He leaped to his feet and pushed their guns down, snapping at them.

“Do you know who this is? Lower your weapons!”

“But Mrs. Sellner is—”

“Idiots! If you’re worried about her, take care of *her* first!”

“S-sorry, sir.”

The agents quickly put their guns away and rushed to assist the woman trembling on the floor. Her face had grown worryingly pale.

Michael bowed deeply to Jinwoo. “My apologies, Hunter Sung. What our agents just did was extremely rude.”

Gone was his relaxed posture. The shakiness in his voice betrayed just how shocked he felt.

Even if they were trained to protect Mrs. Sellner, I can’t believe they pointed their guns at an S-rank hunter.

If this were a more hotheaded hunter, their necks would’ve been snapped, as would Michael’s by association. There was no excuse he could give for pointing a gun at the highest-ranked hunter of a country where firearms were illegal.

Once when Norma fell from her chair and once when the two agents drew their guns... Michael’s chest pounded violently at feeling his heart sink twice in quick succession.

Jinwoo was taken aback as well.

What just happened?

Norma had suddenly screamed and fallen down, then agents of the Hunter Command Center had trained their weapons on him, and lastly, the assistant director had apologized to him after yelling at his men.

Jinwoo had felt surprised at first, then bemused, and then...

“...It’s fine. No one got hurt, so...”

He couldn't bring himself to be mad at them. The second most powerful head of the most influential organization had apologized to him after immediately acknowledging his subordinates' mistakes, so Jinwoo figured making a fuss would be distasteful.

Besides, Jinwoo himself hadn't felt threatened. It was like they were waving children's toys at him. Jinwoo was way out of their league.

"Thank you, Hunter Sung."

Michael straightened up only after Jinwoo's words. He eyed the other man cautiously, but he could see that Jinwoo wasn't being sarcastic. They'd dodged a bullet there.

If this happened to Thomas Andre or Zhigang Liu...

The gunmen would be dead even before Michael could issue an apology. Fortunately, Jinwoo seemed to be a gentleman.

Whew...

He breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat off the bridge of his nose. He had managed to put out the more urgent fire.

He could now switch his focus to his immediate surroundings. Michael bowed to Jinwoo once again before hurriedly checking on Norma's condition.

"Mrs. Sellner, what happened?"

"M-Michael..."

"You're sweating profusely... Do you feel ill?"

The situation might have made Michael break into a cold sweat, but Norma was absolutely drenched.

What's going on?

Concerned, Jinwoo rose and approached her, but she could barely look at him. Her body shuddered violently.

Michael chewed his lower lip.

We can't continue with her in this state...

They'd gotten Jinwoo to the table but couldn't play their winning card. Norma was in no condition to use her power.

Michael turned to Jinwoo with a solemn expression. "Mrs. Sellner seems to be in rough shape. May we get in touch with you later?"

* * *

Meanwhile, an important guest was visiting the Hunter's Association of Korea. It was none other than President Shigeo Matsumoto of the Hunter's Association of Japan.

The two presidents sat at a table across from each other. The only other people with them were their two translators.

President Go spoke first. "I heard about Mr. Goto."

"It's very devastating." President Matsumoto's expression looked sorrowful, but it quickly changed. "However, I am here to discuss the future, not the past."

President Go nodded.

There were several matters that needed to be resolved between them, or rather, between Korea and Japan. The first was splitting the essence stones. The original plan had been to divide them after all the ants died out the following year. However, Jinwoo had taken care of the ants.

Japan already knew this, as they had witnessed Jinwoo's astonishing deeds via their satellite camera.

"Wh-what is he trying to do?"

"The ants...the ants around Jinwoo Sung are disappearing!"

"The minions under his control have started their hunt!"

"They're spreading out all over the island."

"No way..."

And yet, it had really happened. Every single trace of magic power on Jeju Island disappeared in an instant with the exception of a gigantic mana signature that was presumed to be Jinwoo's.

Great power, unpredictable movements, and the ruthlessness he showed in

killing magic beasts that could be left alone.

Would they be able to find a hunter more perfect for Japan than Jinwoo Sung? A smirk appeared on President Matsumoto's face as he recalled the atmosphere of the control center.

He presented several documents he had brought with him.

"What is this?" President Go took the documents.

"A memorandum stating that Japan surrenders its rights to the essence stones on Jeju Island."

".....?"

President Go didn't entirely trust what President Matsumoto was saying, but his eyes widened as he scanned the contents of the documents. President Matsumoto was telling the truth.

"Why?"

Why was the Hunter's Association of Japan leaving this much money on the table despite the huge losses they'd suffered?

President Go got his answer immediately.

"Instead, please hand over Hunter Jinwoo Sung to us."

"Oh-ho." President Go leaned back in his chair as he laughed. "Unfortunately, he isn't a member of the Hunter's Association."

Of course, even if he had been, President Go had no intention whatsoever of letting such a brilliant hunter leave.

"I'm aware." President Matsumoto had expected this response. "However, he has a very close relationship with the Hunter's Association of Korea. Plus, the only way anyone can reach him at this time is through the association."

Unfortunately, the Hunter's Association of Japan didn't have the level of intel that the Hunter Command Center of the United States possessed. In other words, President Matsumoto had to convince the Hunter's Association of Korea to reach out to Jinwoo in his stead.

"I'm not making any demands. I simply want a chance to negotiate with him."

“Are you telling me you’re going to give up an astronomical amount of money for this single chance?”

President Matsumoto was quick to confirm.

Japan had lost ten of its highest-rank hunters on Jeju Island. They urgently needed to recruit replacements, and they still had the hazard pay that was supposed to go to the hunters who’d lost their lives, so they had money to burn. If it meant he could convince Jinwoo to come to Japan, the essence stones would be a small price to pay.

However...

“I refuse.”

He hadn’t expected this response from President Go.

“Excuse me? Did you say you refuse?”

President Matsumoto was shocked. While he was confident that he could convince the hunter to defect, at this point in time, he was merely asking President Go for an audience with Jinwoo. It hadn’t crossed his mind that President Go would be the one to reject his proposal.

“Are you that worried you’ll lose Hunter Sung to Japan?”

“No.” President Go shook his head. “I’m saying you have no right to a single essence stone on Jeju Island to begin with.”

The Japanese interpreter uneasily looked at President Go at the bombshell declaration.

“Sir, is it really okay to translate that word for word?”

“Of course. Please tell him exactly what I said without omitting a single word.”

President Matsumoto’s face turned red after hearing the interpretation.

His voice rose. “President Go! What kind of nonsense is this?”

It was then that the Japanese language slowly came out of President Go’s mouth.

“I would like to talk to you without the interpreters.”

President Matsumoto was surprised. “You...can speak Japanese?”

“When I was young, my father owned a small business in Japan. It has been a while, though, so I’m unable to have any elaborate conversations.”

The two interpreters were dismissed upon President Matsumoto’s agreement.

He spoke first. “Ten of our S-rank hunters were sacrificed for your country.”

Not to mention, the best Japanese hunter, Ryuji Goto, was among the dead.

“If you do not accept my proposal, you’ll leave me no choice. We’ll demand that the Korean government hand over half of the essence stones as we were promised plus compensation for the fallen hunters.”

President Go sneered at this. “President Matsumoto... You seem to mistakenly assume that you have the upper hand.”

“President Go!” President Matsumoto stood abruptly, anger flaring in his eyes. “We fought for your country!”

Unlike the heated Japanese man, President Go coolly answered, “I’m curious about one thing.”

President Matsumoto slowly sat back down as President Go’s composure helped him collect himself.

President Go waited and then said, “Despite Japan’s inclination to be in the international spotlight, you let us take on the raid’s most integral task: bringing down the queen.”

“That was clearly because Korea didn’t have the power to provide a suitable distraction for the army of ants...”

“Yes, but wouldn’t it have been wiser to assign the Koreans as one of the four squads to buy time and send in your most elite team to destroy the queen?”

Indeed...

President Matsumoto’s gaze shifted. “...What are you trying to say, President Gunhee Go?”

For some reason, he addressed President Go by his full name.

“The retreat of your hunters...it had nothing to do with that monstrous ant, did it? You were planning to withdraw from the start.”

“You...you’re crazy.”

“You’re the crazy ones. What were you planning to do after abandoning our hunters to the slaughter?”

President Go’s eyes narrowed.

President Matsumoto burst into laughter. “Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

After a while, he removed a recording device from his pocket, shaking his head.

“Everything you said just now has been recorded. You accused the Japanese hunters without any evidence and refused to pay what you promised.”

There was an insidious smile on his face.

“I’ll let the international community judge you.”

The recording would be good enough to cover up the fact that the Japanese hunters had retreated during the mission. It would definitely sway public opinion. President Go had made a critical mistake with this haphazard accusation.

President Matsumoto wondered if President Go would be furious enough to get physical. That would be even more damning. Besides, the voice file had already finished uploading to a server in the control center back in Japan.

However...

“Evidence? Oh, I have evidence.”

President Go took out a black cube about the size of a stamp from his inside jacket pocket.

“.....?”

“Hunter Sung discovered this at the scene and gave it to me.”

President Matsumoto deflated a bit as he sensed that something was off.

“What...is that?”

President Go grinned at President Matsumoto's perplexed expression.

"This is the black box from a communication device. I was told it was used by Hunter Goto's team."

President Matsumoto's face instantly flushed red. Without missing a beat, President Go pulled out a portable audio player and started the extracted voice file.

Click.

"How long has it been since the Koreans went in?"

"Hold on, please... It's been a little less than ten minutes."

"Ten minutes... It's about time to start retreating."

The voice of Ryuji Goto, one of the most famous Japanese men in the whole world, could be clearly heard.

President Go paused the audio. "Do you know why I haven't made this public, President Shigeo Matsumoto of the Hunter's Association of Japan?"

President Matsumoto slowly shook his head. His face had gone from red to deathly white.

"It was because I wanted the Korean people to enjoy our victory and not tarnish the experience with this shit. I held off for my people, not yours."

The recorder fell from President Matsumoto's hand.

President Go continued. "I'm sure you know what I'm going to say next, President Matsumoto."

President Go crushed the audio player in his hand into smithereens.

"Get out of my office this instant."

* * *

After Jinwoo left, the assistant director remained alone in the room with Norma.

"Mrs. Sellner, what happened?"

Michael had met tons of hunters, and this certainly wasn't his first outing with

Norma. But this was the first time he'd ever seen something like this.

Norma pressed down on her heaving chest and could barely force out words.

"He's a king. And a very powerful king, too."

Michael's eyes widened. Only three people in the world knew exactly how Norma's power worked—the director, the assistant director, and Norma herself. And now she was claiming that Jinwoo Sung was a king.

Ba-dump, ba-dump!

Michael felt his heart racing once more.

"Then...are you saying he's at the caliber of a national-level hunter?"

Norma shook her head. "I don't know that for sure, as this feels different. He's a king, but he's not quite the same."

"What? If you could explain in a way that's easier to understand..."

"While I was looking into his eyes, it felt like he was looking into me, too."

"But that's the same as other hunters—"

"No! Not Hunter Sung! The endless darkness inside him was staring back at me!" Norma frantically screamed at Michael.

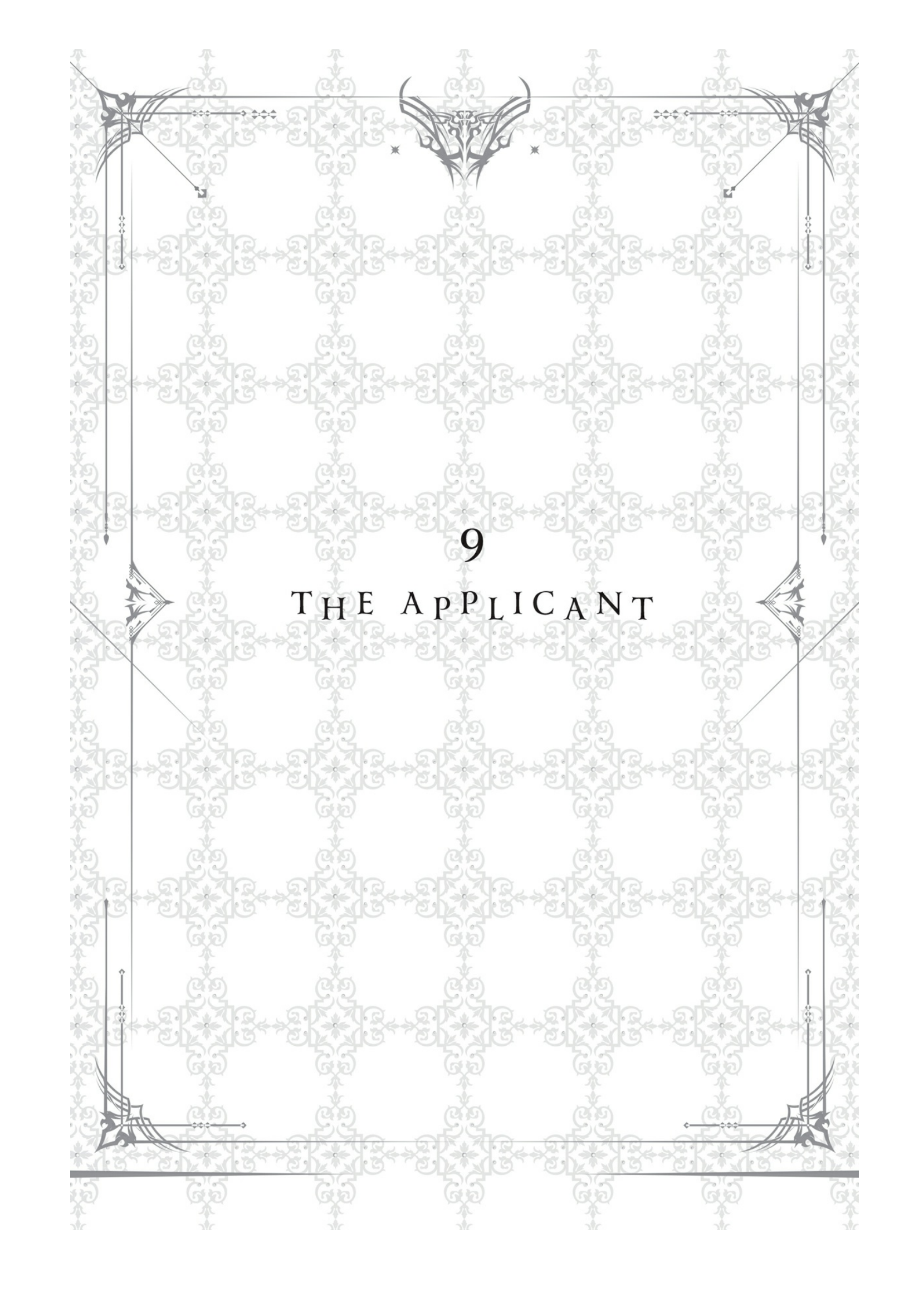
She was shaking, her face ashen. It was a reaction born from the instinctive terror that all living things feel when facing death.

But that wasn't important right now. As her body shook uncontrollably in fear, she managed to force out the most important thing she'd learned about Jinwoo.

"Also, he is..."

Norma had Michael's full attention. She parted her lips with difficulty.

"...limitless."



9

THE APPLICANT



9

THE APPLICANT

Thud.

President Shigeo Matsumoto dropped to his knees.

The head of an entire organization, the man who represented the interests of all hunters in Japan, was kneeling on the floor.

.....

Countless thoughts were racing through his head. Yet, try as he might, he could not think of any other method. There was no room for ego or honor. If everything was made public, it would result in more than losing his job.

“President Go...please forgive me.”

President Go’s gaze was ice-cold.

President Matsumoto had been all bluster and bravado until the tables were turned on him. It’d be impossible for President Go to continue being cordial to him.

“Please get up.”

President Go coolly suggested that he drop the pointless apology, but this just compelled the Japanese man to stubbornly bang his head on the floor.

Bam! Bam!

“Japan has lost more than half of its power when it comes to high-rank hunters, so we desperately need the international community’s help going forward.”

Although Japan had an excellent hunter system, losing half of their S-rank

hunters meant an uncertain future for them. Their existing hunters could easily handle A-rank dungeons...but there was no telling what would happen if an S-rank gate spawned. What had happened on Jeju Island could happen to Japan as well.

“If that recording gets out, we’ll be completely alienated. I beg you, President Go. Please think of the innocent people of Japan and forgive m—!”

“Consider this your punishment.” President Go cut him off. “Consider this punishment for the sin you and your hunters were planning to commit.”

A ticking time bomb that could explode at any moment—this was President Go’s punishment.

President Matsumoto continued prostrating himself on the floor. “President Go...I will not get up until you forgive me. Please, please think this over one more time!”

“Then you leave me no choice.” With a displeased look on his face, President Go took out his cell phone. “You have five minutes.”

What was that supposed to mean? He looked up at President Go, unable to ignore his curiosity.

The Korean man waved his phone. “If you don’t leave here in five minutes, every reporter on this contact list will receive a text message saying that the president of the Hunter’s Association of Japan is on his knees begging me for forgiveness.”

If President Matsumoto was going to drag this matter out due to fear, then President Go was ready to detonate this time bomb right here and now. This was more of a warning to the Japanese man than an actual threat.

“But...” He bit his lower lip.

President Go was an unyielding person who wasn’t about to bend to emotional pleas. President Matsumoto had realized this fact too late. He had sacrificed his pride to shoot his last shot, and it had backfired on him. As he rose helplessly on wobbly legs, President Go set down his phone.

“Be thankful to Hunter Sung.” President Go’s glare was like that of a beast.

“Because if our hunters had been hurt by your decisions instead of that monstrous ant, you wouldn’t have made it out of this room alive.”

President Matsumoto packed his things with shaking hands and fled the association building without looking back. The confidence he’d displayed the last time he’d visited Korea was nowhere to be seen.

“Whew...” President Go leaned back on the couch.

He felt immensely satisfied, but he wasn’t done yet. It was no exaggeration to say that he held the fate of the Hunter’s Association of Japan in his hands.

We all must atone for our sins.

From a young age, he’d lived by the saying that what goes around comes around.

Just then, the phone on the table rang loudly.

Hmm?

President Go picked up, and an urgent voice came through the receiver. His eyes went wide as he listened.

“What? A gate in the middle of the road?”

To make matters worse, it was a B-rank gate, which was more than what an ordinary strike squad could handle.

“Where?”

It would be best to contact one of the big guilds and have them deploy some of their hunters, but...

Wait a minute.

President Go raised an eyebrow at the information he’d just received.

Isn’t Hunter Sung’s guild office near there?

* * *

Traffic was building on the road. Inside one of the idling cars, Jinwoo was in deep thought.

That woman, she saw something.

Norma Sellner. She had experience dealing with a slew of powerful hunters, but something about Jinwoo had freaked her out. What had she seen? A trace of the system? But although the system had set challenging tasks on occasion, it wasn't some fearsome being.

Rather, it's my benefactor.

But how would others see it?

The assistant director had asked if he could reach out to Jinwoo at a later time. However, Norma appeared horrified at Michael's request. Her body language made it clear that she never wanted to see Jinwoo ever again if she could help it.

Besides, Jinwoo was starting to have a sneaking suspicion that her ability would have no effect on him, since he was so fundamentally different from other hunters.

No need to waste any more time.

That was why he'd politely declined Michael's request. Jinwoo would never forget the stunned look on his face.

By the way, what's with all this traffic?

Jinwoo frowned at the sea of cars in front of him.

See, this is why it's better to take the subway.

He was wondering if there had been an accident when...

Vrrr, vrrr, vrrr.

His cell phone, which he had plugged in to charge, vibrated. Jinwoo checked the caller ID.

President Go?

He had seen the president only a few hours ago at the funeral, so why the sudden call? Jinwoo picked up.

"Hunter Sung, this is Gunhee Go."

President Go smoothly explained the current situation unfolding in the middle of Seoul.

“Excuse me? A gate appeared in the middle of the road?”

No wonder. He’d had a feeling this was no ordinary traffic jam. He looked back to turn the van around, but it was bumper-to-bumper traffic, so he couldn’t move an inch.

Jinwoo shook his head as he faced forward.

President Go’s next words were enough to eclipse his frustration over the traffic.

“Based on the evaluation of our staff, it’s a B-rank gate. Would you like to take care of it?”

Whoa.

Jinwoo was barely able to keep himself from laughing at this amazing news. It wouldn’t do to be excited over something inconveniencing so many others.

Ahem.

Jinwoo cleared his throat.

“But can I enter the gate without a raid permit?”

“Ha-ha. Hunter Sung, where do you get a raid permit?”

“From the association.”

“And who am I?”

Jinwoo stifled another laugh. “You’re the president of said association.”

“Ha-ha. Please don’t worry about it. Enter at will.”

“Aweso— I mean, thank you.” Jinwoo smiled widely.

He got out of the van and walked in the direction of the gate by following the emanating mana. He didn’t have to park his vehicle, since the road was basically a parking lot by this point.

“Yes, this black hole you see here is a gate that appeared today in the middle...”

“According to the information we’ve just received, this is a B-rank gate. Due to its high rank, a guild must be called in.”

Reporters had already surrounded the portal. The police were helping association employees cordon off the area.

Hmm...

As Jinwoo moved past the throng of reporters and approached the gate, an uptight-looking female employee blocked his path.

“Hold on, please! What do you think you’re doing?” The representative of the association put her hand on his chest to push him back. “You can’t just come in here like this!”

But no matter how hard she pushed with her small hands, Jinwoo was immovable. She eventually realized that he was a hunter and a high-rank one at that.

“Are you...a hunter?”

Jinwoo showed her his ID. Her eyes nearly fell out of her head.

S rank? J-Jinwoo Sung?

That meant that this man was the hunter who’d performed so brilliantly against the magic-beast ants on Jeju Island...

She belatedly recognized him. Despite working for the association, she hadn’t realized, since he looked different than how he’d appeared on TV. But in a crowd of this size, there would always be people who caught on faster.

“Huh?”

“Is that guy...?”

“It’s Jinwoo Sung!”

“Jinwoo Sung is here to personally take care of the gate!”

The frustrated civilians perked up with delight at the sight of him. Being late for appointments was the furthest thing from their minds as they cheered Jinwoo on.

Regardless of this reaction from the crowd, however, the adamant attitude of the association rep didn’t change. She hesitated before probing Jinwoo.

“Wh-what brings you here?”

Did she even have to ask? There was only one reason for a hunter to be standing in front of a gate. Since it was self-explanatory, Jinwoo simply pointed at the gate over the woman's shoulder.

As the rep briefly looked back, she hardened her resolve. Too many hunters had lost their lives for failing to follow rules and procedures and for relying too much on their own powers.

I'm sure that can happen to S ranks as well.

She had been taught that the association existed in order to prevent these kinds of accidents. The safety of hunters was the priority of the association. Therefore, she couldn't allow someone as valuable as an S-rank hunter to get hurt, so she confidently spoke up.

"Even if you're an S-rank hunter, I can't allow you to ignore procedure."

"....." Jinwoo was speechless as he stared at her, dumbfounded. He hadn't expected this reaction.

She began to think that she had gotten through to Jinwoo. "Do you have a raid permit?"

Jinwoo shook his head.

"Well, even if you did, I can't let you go inside the gate without the minimum number of required squad members."

She stood firm, but Jinwoo didn't think it came from a place of malice. She was simply a by-the-book type.

Jinwoo scratched the back of his head. It seemed as if he had no other choice.

"Please give me a second."

Jinwoo made an urgent call. As the call connected, he handed it to the rep. "Here."

She eyed the phone.

"Please. This call is for you."

The association representative looked at Jinwoo suspiciously. "Wh-who is it?"

"Another person you probably wouldn't allow in."

She took the phone, and her eyes widened as soon as she checked the caller ID.

G-Gunhee Go?

Was the person on the other end really...?

“H-hello?” she answered the phone nervously.

A deep voice replied on the other end.

“This is President Go.”

And sure enough.

She didn’t know where to look, and her head kept bobbing up and down.

“Yes, sir. Yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Will do, sir.”

Click.

She returned the phone to Jinwoo with a defeated look.

As he walked past her, Jinwoo spoke in a low voice. “Thank you.”

“Pardon?”

“For worrying about me.”

“You were just messing with me...?! ”

Jinwoo quickly vanished into the gate.

Ugh...

The association rep was furious and cursed Jinwoo, sending him bad vibes.

Please, God! Make him fall and twist his ankle in the dungeon!

But Jinwoo Sung had returned from Jeju Island without a scratch when it was overrun with S-rank magic beasts.

What could possibly happen to him in a B-rank dungeon?

At that very moment...screams rang out from every direction.

“Huh? What’s happening...?”

“Why is the gate turning red?”

The black surface of the gate turned bloodred after Jinwoo entered. It was a red gate! The name alone could send shivers down the spine.

“Oh...!” The rep panicked at the sight.

Is this because of me?!

Of course, that wasn't possible, but she still felt guilty. As an association employee, she knew well that red gates were dangerous places that connected to unknown worlds, and she was also aware that the survival of even high-rank hunters couldn't be guaranteed.

Oh no...

The color drained from her face as she imagined the worst-case scenario.

If he really gets hurt...

How many minutes had passed? As she continued to blame herself, she looked up from the ground, since she suddenly felt someone else's presence nearby.

There was Jinwoo standing in front of her.

“Oh my!” She startled like she had seen a ghost.

Jinwoo grinned at her as he walked on by.

.....

The representative's face was even redder now than after her exchange with President Go.

Jinwoo looked around and then approached the driver of a truck filled with potatoes.

“Sir, could you please sell me a sack?”

“Excuse me? A sack of potatoes?”

Jinwoo shook his head. “No, just the sack, please.”

* * *

Jinho Yoo, the vice president, recruitment manager, legal representative, and accountant of the guild tentatively named SoloPlay, brightly greeted Jinwoo as

he entered the office.

“Welcome back, boss!”

“Anything to note?”

“No, boss. By the way, one of the applicants to be a founding member—”

“Oh, right, give me the list. I’ll take a look, too.”

Seeing as how Jinho wouldn’t let this matter go, he was probably dying to get this guild established, but it worked out, since Jinwoo felt the same way. They needed one more founding member to meet the required minimum of three people to establish a guild.

Even though the last person is just to fill the head count, it’d be better if they were hardworking, since we’ll be spending a lot of time with them anyway.

Jinwoo was nodding to himself when he noticed that Jinho looked somewhat down.

“What’s the matter?”

“The thing is, boss...”

“Yeah?”

“As you know, we need a lot of money to start a guild. High-rank dungeons go for an incredible amount at auctions. And we’ll have to pay a signing bonus to recruit a hunter, especially for this particular applicant—”

Jinwoo interrupted him. “Is this good enough?”

Thud.

Jinwoo dropped a potato sack on the floor.

Hmm?

Jinho curiously took a look inside the sack. It was full of valuable essence stones.

“Boss...? Wh-what’s all this?”

Jinwoo nonchalantly answered. “I ran into a gate on the way here.”

“.....”

In the few hours he'd been out of the office, Jinwoo had cleared a high-rank dungeon he happened to run into and collected the essence stones just like that.

"You're incredible, boss!"

Jinho didn't think any more of it. There was no point in trying to apply logic to this man.

Jinwoo was pleased to see Jinho's delight at the haul. He then looked toward the conference room.

"So what is she doing here?"

"Huh? Oh, I meant to tell you...we have an applicant waiting, boss."

Jinwoo's eyes widened. "An applicant?"

"Yes, boss."

"Who is it?"

"The person in the conference room, boss."

"Did she say that herself?"

"Yes, boss."

But that didn't make any sense...

Jinwoo strode over and opened the door to the conference room. The woman sitting inside had been quietly drinking the canned coffee Jinho had rushed out to buy her from the convenience store nearby, since they had nothing in the office. She now turned to face him.

"What are you doing here?" Jinwoo was flabbergasted.

Haein calmly gazed up at him. "Well...I wanted to join the guild."

Had he heard her right? Maybe something was wrong with his ears. Haein Cha, the vice president of the best guild in Korea and one of the country's most powerful hunters, wanted to join a guild that hadn't even taken its first steps yet? The only conclusion Jinwoo could come to was that someone else was forcing her to do this. The thing was...

Who could possibly make Haein Cha do anything?

Only one person in Korea could order her around like this.

“Did the president of the association put you up to this?”

Haein looked perplexed at the mention of President Go. “Why would he...?”

Jinwoo was confused, but she looked even more so.

Okay, I need to relax.

This was definitely a shocking and interesting development, but Jinwoo calmly pulled out a chair and took a seat opposite Haein. He silently observed her for a bit and concentrated. Time slowed down for him as he processed all the information he had on Haein.

She’s rattled.

Her pulse, her breathing, her eyes—Haein was keeping a straight face, but nothing escaped Jinwoo’s high perception stat.

But...that didn’t explain why she was trying so hard to join the SoloPlay Guild (name pending).

“Aren’t you still under contract with the Hunters Guild?” asked Jinwoo.

Normally, contracts between guilds and hunters were five years long. Haein had been evaluated as an S-rank hunter and joined the Hunters Guild two years ago. That meant she had at least three years left on her contract, provided she had signed on for only the five-year minimum.

“I can afford to pay the penalty fee.”

Jinwoo raised an eyebrow at Haein’s casual answer. The penalty for breaking a contract was between two to three times the signing bonus. Considering how much the Hunters Guild must have paid to recruit an S-rank hunter like her, the penalty had to be a staggering amount of money.

Jinwoo’s attitude became more businesslike. “The SoloPlay Guild can’t afford to pay for the kind of signing bonus someone of your level warrants, Hunter Cha.”

“I-is the name of the guild SoloPlay?”

“That’s the name the vice president and I agreed on. Do you have an issue with it?”

“No...not at all.” Haein gave a small sigh before going on. “I don’t mind. I’m fine with not receiving a signing bonus.”

She was willing to pay an enormous penalty to leave the Hunters and agree to a new contract without a signing bonus?

What is she up to?

Jinwoo narrowed his eyes. They stared at each other for a while, but Haein had to look away. Her heart was beating even faster than before. Jinwoo focused on what he was hearing. His keen ears didn’t miss the physical changes.

Is she hiding something?

Since things had come this far, Jinwoo couldn’t continue without being direct with her.

“Why are you willing to go to such lengths just to join our guild?”

“.....”

Like he’d thought, Haein pursed her lips, unable to answer easily. Considering how her face was turning red, he was now certain she was keeping something from him.

Wait a minute...

Jinwoo thought back to how differently Haein had been acting at the funeral. He wasn’t sure what her end goal was, but it seemed like she’d been planning this for some time.

Jinwoo waited for her to answer, but she wordlessly kept her head bowed for a while.

But what could she have said? That although the monstrous ant had knocked her out, she could still sense Jinwoo by her side? That even as she plunged into darkness, his scent had comforted her? There were no words to describe how she’d felt at that time.

Whatever I say, he’ll think I’m crazy.

Her heart had skipped a beat when she found out after the fact that Jinwoo had actually been on the island. She had been truly relieved that it wasn't just her imagination. And...

If...

She realized that if, in a million-to-one chance, she ever found herself in a situation where death was inescapable, she'd like for Jinwoo to be by her side.

I want you to be with me until the end, or something like that.

How could she speak such cheesy words when just thinking them made her blush? Haein wasn't the romantic type, so spouting words like that seemed an impossible task for her. So she gave him a prepared response instead.

"I'd..." She finally looked up and met his eyes. "I'd like a simpler life..."

This wasn't exactly the truth, but it wasn't a lie, either. While she couldn't stand the smell of other hunters, just being near Jinwoo helped her unwind. That was what she meant by "simpler."

Although Jinwoo interpreted her words differently, it still made sense to him. He nodded in understanding at her reply. He figured she meant that working with a smaller guild and leaving one as large as the Hunters would make her life easier.

From what he remembered, Haein was only twenty-two or twenty-three years old.

The burden of being an S-rank hunter has probably been too heavy for someone so young.

And doubly so when having to constantly face life-threatening situations like Jeju Island. Jinwoo himself had wanted to pack up and quit countless times when he worked for the association, so he could sympathize.

Unfortunately...

I feel bad for Haein, but...

Jinwoo still couldn't bring himself to just accept her. There was a reason he wanted to name the guild SoloPlay. He planned to clear every dungeon they booked for the guild by himself. He'd asked Jinho to find someone to fill the

quota like they'd done for the C-rank dungeons only because the rule about the minimum number of members was unavoidable. All this was so that he had a method of leveling up.

However, letting Haein join the guild would only invite trouble. Even if she didn't want a signing bonus, they'd still have to pay her a salary, wouldn't they? Signing on an expensive S-rank hunter they'd have no use for would be a waste for the country, since she wouldn't have anything to do.

However...

It'll look suspicious if I turn away an S-rank hunter for no reason, especially if she's waiving her signing bonus.

So Jinwoo came up with a clever plan. "Actually, there's a test to join our guild."

"Pardon me? The job listing didn't say anything about—"

Jinwoo cut off the confused Haein. "We only instituted the test recently, so our vice president seems to have forgotten to include it."

Haein grew serious as soon as she heard the word *test*.

"What kind of test is it?"

Jinwoo was caught off guard.

Is she serious?

He'd expected her to walk out at the mere mention of a test, as a matter of pride. Yet here she was doing the opposite. It actually looked like he'd stoked her competitive spirit instead. By her stoic face, Jinwoo could sense a hidden passion burning.

Is she one of those people who never turns down a challenge?

Or was she just being stubborn? Either way, Jinwoo couldn't pretend he was joking and back down now.

"You have to battle a minion of my choosing."

That was a definite blow to her self-esteem.

"....."

Is your opinion of me really that low, Hunter Jinwoo Sung? Strangely, Jinwoo could almost hear those words in her voice despite her unreadable expression as they silently regarded each other.

“Which minion are you going to choose?”

“I’ll pick an especially strong one for you, Hunter Cha.”

“...Works for me.” She didn’t back down.

But Haein would never in a million years be able to guess who she’d be going up against or who the latest addition to his shadow army was.

Jinwoo figured that as competitive as she was, she was also the kind of person who would acknowledge her defeat and give up, so he accepted the challenge.

“All right, then.”

“When is this test?”

“Right now.”

Forming the guild was an urgent matter, so he didn’t want to waste more time than necessary with Hunter Cha. Since the topic had been broached, they might as well get it over with. The location would be the gym at the Hunter’s Association Headquarters. S-rank hunters had the privilege of using the gym anytime they wanted as one of the perks they enjoyed.

“Understood.” Haein nodded.

She also preferred to not drag things out. They rose to their feet together as if they’d planned it.

Hold on.

At that moment, Jinwoo was struck by a thought. He stopped Haein just as she grabbed the doorknob.

“Hunter Cha, please wait.”

“Yes?”

“No need to go out that way.”

“.....?”

Haein wasn't sure what he meant. The room had only one door, and surely Jinwoo wasn't suggesting that they go out the window.

Jinwoo approached Haein. "There's an easier way to get there."

"Sorry?"

"In order to do that, I have to stand close to you. Is that okay?"

"Oh....."

Haein recalled something President Baek had mentioned to her. Just as the Korean strike squad had been on the brink of death, Jinwoo had popped into existence behind him.

Is he going to show me how he did that?

She felt a lump in her throat as Jinwoo's face drew closer than she'd expected.

"Excuse me." Jinwoo gently wrapped his arms around her. He'd carried her bridal-style around the ant cave, so a hug wasn't that big of a deal to him.

On the other hand, Haein's face instantly turned red, but she didn't push him away or try to break loose.

...What a nice scent...

As Haein blushed, Jinwoo readied himself after carefully making sure she wouldn't slip out of his grasp.

All right.

There was something he'd wanted to test out, and this was as good a time as any.

"You might feel dizzy." It'd happened to him the first time.

At that, Haein wrapped her arms around his waist and whispered, "Okay."

Jinwoo looked straight ahead and wordlessly activated the skill.

Shadow Exchange.

Vwoooooom.

Jinwoo and Haein soundlessly fell into their shadows. At that exact moment,

Jinho entered the room with tea and snacks he'd hurriedly picked up from the convenience store when he noticed that the meeting seemed to be running long.

"Please help yourself to—"

Jinho made eye contact with an embarrassed-looking high orc shadow soldier.

"....."

Crash!

Jinho dropped the tray he was carrying, and the glasses shattered into pieces.

"Wh-what the—?!"

Frightened, Jinho squeezed his eyes shut for a second, but when he opened them, the shadow soldier had disappeared without a trace.

But I definitely saw...!

He rubbed his eyes hard, shook his head, and looked around, but he couldn't find any trace of the magic beast.

Have I been pushing myself too hard lately?

For him to be hallucinating... He cocked his head, then turned around in search of a rag before abruptly stopping dead in his tracks.

"Where did the boss and Hunter Cha go?"

* * *

As Jinwoo sank into the shadow, he could see the same thing happening to Haein.

I knew it...

Jinwoo's suspicion was correct. After using Shadow Exchange several times, he'd formed a theory about the true nature of the skill, and he had been proven right. Shadow Exchange created a gate, as evidenced by the fact that he and Haein were passing through together.

The shadow on the ground serves as an entry point, with the exit being the destination.

And the coordinates of the exit were determined by a soldier's location. The fact that he could create an actual gate, albeit with a three-hour cooling-off period between uses, was amazing news. This meant that if he put his mind to it, he could travel back and forth from the other side of the planet every three hours.

Jinwoo swallowed at the revelation.

His surprise didn't last long, though. The darkness soon gave way to light, and before they knew it, Jinwoo and Haein arrived at the gym. Jinwoo had left a shadow the last time he was here in the event he'd ever need to get to the association in a hurry.

Chk, chk. chk, chk...

The lights started to turn on as the sensors detected their mana, making the gym quite bright. Haein could see the brightness through her shut eyes, so she opened them.

"How...?!"

She couldn't help but be shocked. They were somewhere with which she was very familiar, but it felt like her surroundings had changed in the blink of an eye.

How is this possible?

Haein had no idea such a skill existed. Amazed, she looked around before her gaze settled on Jinwoo.

"You..."

She had a lot of questions but couldn't bring herself to ask them. She wasn't even sure how to articulate them. Besides, they were way too close together to have a proper conversation.

"You're safe now, so..." Jinwoo let go of her wrist and waist. "No need to hang on to me."

Haein could only nod in silence as she rubbed the wrist Jinwoo had been gripping.

"Let's start." Jinwoo moved away from the corner where his high orc soldier had been hiding and walked to the center of the gym.

“Yes.”

As she joined Jinwoo, Haein realized she’d left her sword in her car. Despite it being essential to her work, she couldn’t very well bring a sword to a job interview.

She told him as much. “I left my weapon in my car...”

“Oh, you mean the pickax?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, the one you were holding in the high orc dungeon.”

Haein flushed at the embarrassing memory she’d forgotten about. “No, my weapon is—”

It dawned on her that he was teasing when he giggled.

“.....”

Jinwoo waved it off after taking in her red face. “I’m only kidding.”

Enough joking around.

But now what?

Haein was great, but there was no way she could take on the soldier he had in mind with her bare hands. While Jinwoo wanted his soldier to win, he didn’t want her getting hurt, either.

“Don’t worry about it.” Haein looked toward the equipment room of the gym. “They should have something I can borrow.”

Oh?

Jinwoo’s eyes twinkled at this bit of information. Haein walked over to the door and swiped her hunter’s license on the key-card reader next to it. The door swung open to reveal spare weapons that seemed very useful stored in rows inside the room.

Jinwoo was amazed by the readiness of the Hunter’s Association.

I didn’t know they had something like this.

Jinwoo had always wondered how the association dues were spent, but it

looked like they put the money to good use.

Haein inspected the weapons inside and came out wielding a sword similar in length to her own.

“I’m ready.”

“Are you going to be okay with that? It’s not your sword, so you might be uncomfortable with it.”

Haein shook her head. “It doesn’t matter what weapon I use. It’s not like magic beasts attack hunters based on how they’re armed.”

That was true. Jinwoo didn’t object, since he fully agreed with that sentiment. He appreciated her straightforward nature.

I guess it’s time to summon a soldier.

As if to show that she truly was ready, Haein released some of her mana. If Jinwoo summoned a regular soldier to oppose her, she would tear it in half in no time. So he played the best card he could.

Come out.

A smaller shadow separated from Jinwoo’s own, and after moving several paces to the side, a knight noiselessly emerged. His armor and helmet were jet-black except for the waist-length red mane attached to the top of the helmet. It was Igris, the best swordsman in Jinwoo’s shadow army.

I told Hunter Cha that I’d summon my strongest soldier, but...

Jinwoo thought summoning Beru would be going too far. Every member of the Korean team had been completely terrified of what Beru had been before becoming Jinwoo’s shadow soldier. Haein herself had been sent to the brink of death by him. Jinwoo didn’t want to potentially traumatize her, so he couldn’t bring himself to summon the shadow ant.

Fang was out, since there would be a real danger of him burning down the gym.

Consequently, Jinwoo had landed on Igris.

You’re the only one I can count on.

Looking at Igris's imposing figure, Jinwoo was certain he had chosen correctly.

However...

"Mr. Sung."

Jinwoo turned to Haein.

"How will you determine a win or a loss?"

Haein's voice was cold enough to freeze the heart of anyone who heard it, and it made Jinwoo start to second-guess his choice.

He deliberated his answer before suggesting, "Let's say the test will last either until my minion gets destroyed or you surrender."

Haein nodded in agreement to the proposed conditions and brandished the sword she'd taken from the equipment room. Even though she was wielding a blade of average rank that could be easily purchased anywhere, the energy coming from it because of her was incredible.

She's definitely strong.

Jinwoo could sense that Haein, who stood with the best of the best S-rank hunters, had resolved to give it her all.

Igris drew his swords, holding one in each hand. Jinwoo had an inkling that Igris might actually lose to Haein. But then...

Wait a minute, she said the weapon doesn't matter, right?

Jinwoo smiled and addressed Haein. "Could you please turn around for a second?"

".....?" Haein was baffled but turned as requested without protest.

Jinwoo took the Demon Monarch's Sword from his inventory and handed it to Igris.

Use this.

She'd said it didn't matter what kind of weapon she used, so that should also mean it didn't matter what her opponent used.

Igris was so moved that the master himself would grant him a sword that he

was about to kneel in gratitude, but Jinwoo abruptly stopped him.

I told you, you don't need to be so formal all the time.

If only Iron had at least half of Igris's manners. In any case...

Jinwoo called to Haein. "We're ready."

Haein turned and spotted Igris holding a sword crackling with blue electricity, something he hadn't been holding earlier.

"....."

"Shall we start?" Jinwoo asked to proceed without addressing the change in weaponry.

"...Yes." Haein reluctantly assented.

"Then begin."

With that, Igris made the first move by swinging the Demon Monarch's Sword.

Vwoom!

A bolt of lightning flew straight at Haein. She flinched but managed to avoid the blast as nimbly as a cat by bending her torso backward.

Kra-koom!

The bolt struck the wall, leaving a blackened scorch mark.

Haein straightened up and glared at Jinwoo, but he avoided eye contact and put on an innocent face.

.....

Haein wordlessly gripped her sword with both hands.

As she did, Igris charged her at a terrifying clip, intent on making her surrender as ordered. However, Haein didn't bat an eye as she threw herself at Igris.

* * *

President Go's office was situated on the highest floor of the main association building. From this vantage point, he could see all the association buildings as

well as the surrounding area.

Hmm?

He had been reading confidential reports when something outside his window caught his attention. Lights were on in the supposedly empty gym. Confused, Gunhee buzzed his secretary.

“You called, sir?”

“Did someone rent out the gym for the day?”

“I don’t see a booking, sir.”

“Really?”

Gunhee covered the receiver with his hand and sorted out his thoughts as he stared at the gym. He then spoke in a low voice.

“Turn on the surveillance cameras and put the feed on my monitor.”

“Yes, sir.”

Soon, the TV that took up an entire wall of his office showed Jinwoo and Haein in the gym with their arms tightly wrapped around each other.

“Ahem.” Surprised, Gunhee coughed.

No matter how many times he checked, it was definitely them. He cocked his head.

Are those two in a relationship?

But if he thought about it...when Haein had initially come to in the helicopter, the first person she’d asked about was Jinwoo.

I should’ve seen it.

Gunhee was smiling fondly as he watched the two hunters on the screen. They both hated calling attention to themselves, to the point where they’d requested that their personnel files be sealed as soon as they became S-rank hunters. However, by this point, everyone in Korea knew who Jinwoo was, and the same could be said for Haein. The only place such a couple could spend time alone was in the association gym after hours.

For youngsters like them to have a date at the gym of all places...what a sound relationship they must have.

Gunhee continued grinning as he shook his head a few times. He paged his secretary again.

“I’m sorry, but could you please turn off the surveillance cameras in the gym?”

“Sir? But...”

“Note in the records that there was a maintenance check today.”

“Understood, sir.”

The TV turned off as soon as he hung up the phone. Gunhee gazed at the gym for a moment, then chuckled as he returned to his reports. But then...

Rrrrrmbl...

The water in Go’s glass rippled as a slight quake emanated from the gym.

“Ah.” He didn’t bother to look, but the smile on his face remained.

Oh, to be young again indeed.

* * *

Oh boy...

Jinwoo massaged his temple at the growing headache. He appeared to have underestimated Haein. Although Jinwoo had bestowed the Demon Monarch’s Sword to Igris, Haein was still proving too much for the knight.

Jinwoo called off the match as soon as she severed Igris’s left arm.

“Stop!” While they could respawn, it wasn’t pleasant seeing his soldiers get destroyed.

“Hwoooo...” Haein exhaled hard to get her breathing back under control. Though she’d won, Igris had been tough enough that she was drenched in sweat. She wiped some of it from her brow with a pale, thin finger.

It was unfortunate, but Jinwoo summoned Igris back, easily accepting the defeat. “I lost.”

Vmmm.

Igris returned to his shadow. However, Haein didn't lay down her sword.

"No, this one doesn't count."

".....?"

She was invalidating the match? But why?

Haein continued. "You said you'd choose your strongest minion, didn't you?"

She approached him until there was only one step left between them.

"Was that black knight really your strongest?"

It was a rhetorical question. It was obvious she was just looking for confirmation of something about which she was already certain. When Jinwoo shook his head, Haein immediately answered.

"Then please summon your strongest minion as promised."

"You might get hurt."

"That's okay. I've wanted a rematch."

Jinwoo's eyes widened. "You know?"

Haein nodded. "I've seen the footage."

Haein had watched the video of the raid several times, and one of the magic beasts that used fire seemed familiar to her.

"That fire-breathing minion was the high orc shaman, the boss of the A-rank dungeon, wasn't it?"

Haein had surmised that with Jinwoo's abilities, it stood to reason he could do the same with the monstrous ant. She'd agreed to this test assuming that he would be her opponent.

This win means nothing.

Haein wanted to prove her mettle to Jinwoo by winning against the minion who used the monstrous ant's power.

Jinwoo considered this briefly and then nodded.

Beru.

A shadow soldier whose entire body was cloaked in smoke appeared behind him. Haein instinctively stepped back at the sight. The shadow ant possessed an incredibly terrifying energy, just like before.

Jinwoo was genuinely worried about Haein, whose face had turned pale.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

Although Beru was currently weaker than when he was alive, he was still a creature born to kill hunters.

Haein pressed her lips together in a straight line and silently nodded.

Beru, who’d been watching her, turned and bowed to Jinwoo.

My king, what would you have me do to this human?

Haein simply watched and waited as Beru wordlessly communicated with his master, almost as if she, too, could hear him. Jinwoo replied telepathically to him.

Defeat her without hurting her.

As you wish.

The former-Ant-King-turned-shadow-soldier faced the apprehensive warrior.

Gulp!

Haein swallowed hard. The enormous amount of magic power she felt from her opponent was giving her goose bumps.

Jinwoo took this magic beast down?

While Igris hadn’t fazed Haein a bit, she was now shaking like a leaf.

With his preparations to do his king’s bidding complete, Beru let out a savage battle cry.

SKRAAAW!

Bladelike claws extended from the tips of his fingers, but Jinwoo gave him a sharp look.

...No claws.

Beru retracted his claws immediately, in high spirits. Jinwoo gave the order one more time.

Hurt her, and you'll be in a world of hurt yourself.

I shall do as you command.

With Beru's answer in hand, Jinwoo announced the start of the match.

"Begin!"

Beru made the first move. He had been given a single command.

Defeat the enemy without hurting her.

As one who had experience giving orders, Beru knew how to interpret Jinwoo's.

Overwhelm her with a display of strength and make her lose her will to fight.

Zmm!

Haein lost sight of Beru for a split second, and before she knew it, he appeared in front of her.

".....!"

In that brief instant, despite being stunned by Beru's speed, Haein felt her reflexes kick in, and she struck him with her sword. She got in a few dozen attacks, but Beru avoided everything while keeping his feet glued to the same spot. His moves were precise without a single unnecessary action. He was so quick that he was a blur of afterimages.

The power gap between them was unmistakable.

This doesn't make sense!

Haein was in disbelief as her strikes kept missing.

How can he dodge at this close of a range without taking a single step?

She tried once more. Haein aimed at her opponent's neck, but he easily avoided it by leaning back slightly. No matter which direction she came from, no matter how much she changed up her attack pattern, her target moved out of harm's way with ease.

How...?!

Beru wasn't even a real magic beast but a minion who was borrowing a dead magic beast's power. How could he be so strong? And...

How strong is Jinwoo to control this minion so easily...?

Haein's attacks slowed at the dim terror she was feeling. Beru took the opportunity to swat her sword swings aside with the back of his hand each time before finally getting up in her face.

Haein was stunned by the stench of death that abruptly flooded her nose.

It's over.

As soon as Beru's wide-open mouth filled her vision, she couldn't help but let out a scream.

"Ah!"

Instead of crushing her head with his jaws, the minion let out a terrifying roar.

SKRAAAH!

The magic power contained in Beru's roar pushed Haein back.

"Eek!"

Jinwoo grimaced. He couldn't find any enjoyment in watching such a one-sided fight. And yet...Haein got back up and adjusted the grip on her sword as if she had no intention of surrendering.

Jinwoo raised an eyebrow.

What's going on in her head?

Haein wasn't some low-rank hunter who couldn't accept a huge difference in power between her and her opponent even after witnessing it for herself.

She's not reckless enough to rush into a fight she's got no hope of winning, either.

Then did she have something up her sleeve?

I hope she knows what she's doing.

Jinwoo's psychic bond with Beru allowed him to sense the strength of the

murderous intentions the shadow ant was suppressing. Meanwhile, Haein's will to fight was as indomitable as ever despite her obvious disadvantage.

Jinwoo had an ominous feeling. A solemn expression came across his face as he observed the two fighters.

.....?

Beru couldn't understand Haein's decisions. He had put the huge power gap between them on display several times, so why wouldn't she surrender?

The king of the ants, who ruled the top of the food chain, began feeling irritated at this human female who was but a mere plaything to him. His memories of being a dominant power fueled Beru's rage.

How dare she...?

Beru materialized right in front of Haein, leaned in, and looked her in the eye. Any two living beings could tell through eye contact alone which of them was predator and which was prey. Her instincts should scream warnings at her. Beru's plan was to make Haein lose her will to fight by waking up her basic instincts...but it didn't seem to have worked.

As Jinwoo suspected, Haein still had a card left to play. The move Haein was most confident at was a skill called Sword Dance. She moved progressively faster and faster, drawing elegant arcs in the air with her blade as if dancing.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

However...as Beru continued to block Haein's fluid and relentless strikes with his claws, his displeasure grew apparent in his expression.

Enough playing around.

With his bare hand, Beru grabbed the sword coming right at him and shattered it.

Crack!

Half the blade broke off. Despite the setback, Haein's eyes blazed with a cold fury.

I have one shot at this.

She focused all her magic power on what remained of the sword in her hands. This particular skill was called Sword of Light. This was her first time revealing this skill. Because it consumed too much magic power, she could use it only as a last resort.

The blade shone brightly.

Beru had lowered his guard after breaking her sword, so she leaped toward him and thrust her weapon forward.

Jinwoo was utterly astonished.

No!

Naturally, he hadn't been worried about Beru, but before he could do anything, the sword pierced Beru's midsection as it shone with a gold light.

SKRAAAAA!

In that fleeting moment, one thought struck Beru.

She's the enemy.

Beru wasn't concerned for his own mortality. But if he fell, this woman's sword would be pointed at his king.

And so...the basic instinct that all the shadow soldiers possessed, the prime directive imprinted in all their minds, came to the forefront.

Protect my master!

Beru's mind reset, and Jinwoo's command to defeat the enemy without hurting her was wiped from his memory. Beru underwent a terrifying physical transformation for the sake of protecting his master. His body grew, his jaws became strong enough to chew through iron, and his sharp claws extended.

"Stop!"

Beru was primed to tear apart the enemy of his king with his ten deadly claws.

Swipe!

Just as his claws neared Haein's body...

Tmp!

Jinwoo narrowly made it in time. "...I said stop."

He glowered at Beru while holding on tightly to both sets of claws with his bare hands. Beru trembled as his eyes met Jinwoo's. Without bothering to pull the sword out of his stomach, he leaped back and dropped to the ground face-first, begging for Jinwoo's forgiveness.

"M-my king, please show me mercy..."

Jinwoo understood why Beru had acted this way, since his instincts to protect his master had been loud enough to telepathically reach him.

.....

Jinwoo momentarily glared at Beru before looking to the side.

Whump.

Haein collapsed to the floor, having no energy to remain standing after staring death in the face, however briefly.

"Are you okay?"

As Jinwoo approached, Haein tried to rise but gave up. She could only look down at the floor and nod.

"Yes."

She wasn't very convincing.

Jinwoo helped her to her feet and asked, "Why are you pushing yourself to your limit? There's no need to try so hard to join our guild, is there?"

"....."

It was only a test. What was more, it was a kind of entrance exam designed to prevent her admission.

But she had been so obsessed with winning the match that she'd gone so far as to unleash an incredibly dangerous skill. This couldn't just be about a desire to win.

So...

"I have to ask..." Jinwoo proceeded with caution so as not to upset her. "Do

you have a thing for me or something?”

“What?” She seemed dazed, like someone had slapped her upside the head, so Jinwoo shrugged.

Is that not it, either?

But then...Haein organized her thoughts before revising her response.

“Yes...I think so.”

* * *

At the Hunter Command Center of the United States, the director wasn't pleased with the news that his men had failed to recruit Jinwoo. He was waiting to hear the details directly from the assistant director instead of receiving a paper report.

The assistant director arrived at his office with Norma.

“What happened?” The director demanded before they could even take a seat.

This was the first time anyone had turned down a recruitment offer involving Norma in the history of the Hunter Command Center.

Michael stood with a gloomy expression and lowered his head. “I am so sorry, sir.”

“I didn't call you here for an apology.”

The director pressed a button that locked the door and covered up the glass walls of his office. The room was totally soundproof now.

They took measures to avoid leaks regarding Norma, including refraining from using phones or e-mails for matters involving her, so the director still had no idea what exactly had occurred in Korea.

“What happened over there?”

Michael looked at Norma. She slowly nodded, and only then did Michael speak.

“Mrs. Sellner observed Hunter Sung.”

“And?”

The director understood how Norma's power worked, so the result of her observation was as important as the result of their recruitment efforts.

"According to Mrs. Sellner, Hunter Sung is"—Michael licked his dry lips—"a king."

"What?" The director leaped to his feet.

Out of all the strong hunters Norma had encountered, she had assessed only three as kings. The pinnacle of all hunters, each was powerful enough to shake up the global community, and Jinwoo had now been added to that short list.

The director looked at Norma. "Does this mean that Hunter Sung holds the power of a national-level hunter?"

She shook her head.

"Oh?" The director furrowed his brow.

Michael understood the director's reaction, as his had been the same.

Norma let out a sigh.

"I...should explain." She began without missing a beat. "I know you're both aware of what my abilities entail."

The director and the assistant director nodded simultaneously, and the director responded first.

"You said that awakened beings had connections to and could access the power on the other side."

When Norma looked into the eyes of an awakened being, she was able to detect a passage connecting them to the other side. On rare occasions, the passage shone with a blinding light because the power coming through was that strong. Those were the aforementioned "kings."

"So what's so different about Hunter Sung?"

"He doesn't have a connection." Norma shivered. "As soon as I looked into his eyes, the darkness in him looked back at me. Oh God... It was like looking at darkness incarnate."

The assistant director argued, "But he's helping tons of people as an active

hunter. I don't think he's an evil person..."

If that was the case, Jinwoo would've instantly killed the two agents who had pulled their guns on him. However, the Korean man had easily let it go.

Norma shook her head with a firm expression. "It's not about whether Hunter Sung is good or evil. I'm talking about the source of his power."

The director had been listening quietly to them with a hand under his chin, and he finally spoke up. "But you're certain that he's a powerful hunter, right?"

Norma nodded. "Hunter Sung doesn't get his power from somewhere else. His power doesn't come through the passage, but rather, it's within himself, so no connection limits his power. In other words..."

"There's no limit to his power." Michael shivered as the words unintentionally tumbled out of his mouth. He couldn't wrap his mind around how powerful Jinwoo could become.

The director was deep in thought after listening to everything. He eventually nodded as he came to a decision.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sellner."

After seeing Norma off, he led the assistant director to the basement of the Hunter Command Center.

"Where are we going, sir?"

"Sub-level nine."

"The filing room where documents are stored?"

"There's more than documents down there." As he watched the elevator continue its descent, he continued. "If Mrs. Sellner's skill won't lure him here, we'll have to find something else that will."

Jinwoo was young and possessed enormous power. If he was as impossibly powerful as Norma claimed, it didn't matter whether the source of his skill was lightness or dark. A knife held in self-defense would just be seen as a weapon by others. The director wanted to own the knife known as Jinwoo Sung.

Upon arriving at sub-level nine, the director unlocked the door and ventured

inside. A few employees greeted him as he passed, but he didn't even acknowledge them.

"Do you remember the first S-rank gate?"

"Of course."

How could Michael forget the horrific dungeon break that crippled the western part of the United States? The government had offered the best hunters in the world a handsome reward to get rid of the boss of that S-rank gate, and they'd succeeded.

However, only five hunters survived the ordeal. One magic beast had killed off dozens of the world's best hunters. Without their sacrifice, the country would've ceased to exist. Thus, they had granted the five hunters who'd saved the country all the rights, privileges, and powers the United States had to offer, giving each individual the same level of power and influence as the country itself. It was from this that the term *national-level hunter* was born.

The director uttered the name of the magic beast that had caused the worst disaster in history.

"Kamish the Dragon."

Mage hunters claimed that Kamish meant "an undying flame."

The director entered the last room on this level and opened the safe inside, revealing a heavily secured rune stone.

Michael was startled. "Is that...?"

"Yes, it is." The director smiled as he placed his hand on the tempered glass box housing the rune stone. "This is the rune stone that came from Kamish's remains."

After Kamish was defeated, two of the national-level hunters had settled down in the United States, like a parting gift from Kamish. The United States had then established the Hunter Command Center and focused all their efforts on increasing the power of hunters so as to avoid a repeat of that tragedy.

That was about eight years ago. Since there were no mage hunters among the surviving national-level hunters, Kamish's rune stone had been waiting a long

time for a suitable master in the cold basement of the Hunter Command Center.

A knowing smile came across the director's face as he gazed at the contents of the glass box.

"Kamish will give this wonderful country yet another invaluable gift."

10
HOW ABOUT
SOLOPLAY GUILD?



10

HOW ABOUT SOLOPLAY GUILD?

“Boss, I was told yesterday that it’d be difficult for us to get the permit for the gate.”

Jongsu, the guild master of the Knights Guild, had his mood soured as soon as he arrived at work.

“What?”

Yoontae, the vice master, quickly explained. “The association’s evaluation came out higher than they expected.”

“Is it an S-rank gate?”

“No, but it’s a max-level A rank.”

“What a pain in the ass.”

S-rank gates, they could pass on easily. The Knights Guild had no S ranks in their roster, so it would be impossible for them. Jeju Island had made it clear that you’d need all of South Korea’s S-rank hunters for that.

However, A-rank gates were a different story. People would talk if the Knights, a top-five guild, couldn’t handle an A-rank gate. The guild was already on shaky ground, and this could leave them with none to stand on at all.

“What’re we going to do, boss?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“If we pass on the gate, the Fame Guild will take it for sure...”

The Fame Guild of the Honam area... Jongsu’s eye twitched at the mere mention.

“This gate is on our turf, and you want to hand it over to Dongwook Ma on a silver platter?”

“I’m just saying, boss.”

“Over my dead body.”

“So you’re going for it?”

Enraged, Jongsu bit his lip. It was clear why he did. It was best he refrained from blurting anything out when he was this worked up, since the lives of his guild members were on the line. He could feel a headache coming on.

Our A-rank hunters are as good as anyone from the larger guilds.

Both the quality and quantity of their A-rank hunters were comparable to the Hunters Guild, the best in Korea. The only issue was their lack of S-rank hunters. The Knights Guild was in danger of dropping out of the top five solely because they lacked a single S rank.

Their elite members could easily take care of the average A-rank gate, but if the magic power of the gate was on the high end, their hunters would be risking their lives because of the lack of S-rank hunters, since the level of difficulty for such gates was closer to that of S rank despite the A-rank classification. Hence why the Hunter’s Association was on the fence on whether to grant them the raid permit.

.....

As Jongsu continued racking his brain, Yoontae spoke up cautiously. “Boss, we’ll be done for if it turns out to be a red gate.”

“That’s true.”

An upper-A-rank gate was enough of a problem, but if it turned into a red gate? The mere thought was horrifying. If they were lucky, maybe half of them would survive. Otherwise, the entire strike squad, including Jongsu himself, would lose their lives.

The smart thing to do would be to let it go.

However, their fate would be sealed if word got out that they’d given up an A-rank gate. What rookie would be willing to join a guild that didn’t have an S-

rank hunter and couldn't even clear an A-rank gate?

"How about we team up with another guild?"

Jongsu shook his head. "Why would they agree knowing we only asked them because we couldn't handle it ourselves?"

Especially not when they could take the gate for themselves without bothering to involve anyone else. And even if another guild agreed to join forces, there'd be yet another problem.

It'd be advertising to everyone that we're incompetent.

As the two men grew more concerned...

"If not another guild, then what about another person?"

The men turned toward the female voice coming from the side of the room. It was Yerim Jung, the A-rank healer assigned to the head strike squad. Healers got a huge say in matters regarding raids, especially if the healer was an A rank with a variety of skills like Yerim.

Unfortunately, with the fate of the Knights Guild hanging in the balance, it was difficult for Jongsu to hide his helplessness.

"We're going inside a top-level A-rank gate, so what help would an indivi—?" Jongsu stopped.

Oh!

The face popped into his head of a man who could wipe out not only A-rank but also S-rank magic beasts all on his own. Jongsu was so excited that he jumped out of his seat.

What if Jinwoo Sung joined us on the raid?!

The man was able to easily defeat a magic beast that an entire group of S-rank hunters couldn't. If Jinwoo helped them, the safety of their squad members would be guaranteed. And that wasn't all. The Knights Guild would avoid the stigma of needing another guild's help.

This would even boost our reputation.

There was no downside to this. It would save the lives of their team members

as well as restore the honor of the Knights Guild. Talk about killing two birds with one stone.

Jongsu giddily asked, “What’s Hunter Sung up to these days?”

Neither Yerim, who had proposed the initial idea, nor Yoontae, who had been listening quietly, had a clue.

“Other than clearing that gate that appeared in the middle of the road, he’s been pretty quiet,” Yoontae said, recalling something he’d seen on the news recently. He took out his cell phone. “Should I look up his contact info, boss?”

“No, that’s okay. Don’t bother.”

“What?”

“We can’t do something this important over the phone. We have to talk to him in person.”

“I see!”

Jongsu grinned at Yoontae. “We’re going to Seoul.”

* * *

That night, Haein burrowed under her blanket and kicked herself in embarrassment.

“I think so”? Did I really say “I think so”?!

That was basically a confession! She flailed around for a bit but suddenly froze as a thought crossed her mind.

But then...

How should Haein interpret Jinwoo’s response?

“Then isn’t there a better way to handle this than joining the guild?”

At the time, Haein had said she’d think about it in order to flee. Her brain stopped working every time she reflected on that moment. She flushed as she unwittingly recalled it again.

When Haein had looked upon the crazed eyes of the enlarged minion, she’d felt as though death was inevitable. She’d felt absolute fear of the destiny of those who were prey. Haein had squeezed her eyes shut after seeing his claws

coming at her from either side.

But at that moment...she'd felt warmth behind her, and a familiar scent had wrapped itself around her.

Oh...

Haein had slowly opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder to see Jinwoo standing there, gripping the minion's claws and glowering at him.

It was true that moment had made her heart pound. However...

"I have to ask... Do you have a thing for me or something?"

Asking that question in that moment was cheating, wasn't it?

Wait, no.

Haein shook her head vigorously as if trying to banish the notion. Even if Jinwoo had asked, she shouldn't have answered honestly.

Since he could think of me as a freak.

But...she hadn't meant to. Despite telling herself to keep quiet, her mouth had opened of its own accord. It had happened only because she felt relaxed around him, like she wasn't herself.

Like I'm not myself?

For some reason, those words sounded familiar to Haein, but from where? She'd definitely heard something similar before.

And then...a memory that had been erased brushed through her mind.

"Please tell him..."

Haein bolted upright.

.....!

It definitely hadn't been that long ago, but the faint voice calling out from deep within her memories was similar to the sensation of having just woken up and trying to remember the dream she'd been having.

"Please tell him that..."

I...

Haein tried to pull up the memory of whose voice this was as well as the contents of the message. It was hazy, as if it was surrounded by a thick fog, but it was gradually starting to take shape.

“Please tell him that he needs to be careful...”

I met Hunter Byunggu Min.

When she was unconscious and had fallen into an endless darkness, the one who had pulled her out was Byunggu. At first, it had felt unpleasant as the peaceful darkness was disrupted, but that feeling hadn't lasted.

She had found it strange that Byunggu was wearing black armor. The only part of him she could make out was his face, but his expression had been uncharacteristically sad.

Haein felt a sudden chill run down her spine as she processed these memories.

Byunggu had looked like he was trying not to cry as he spoke.

“Tell Hunter Jinwoo Sung.”

Tell Hunter Jinwoo Sung...?

“Please tell him that he needs to be careful of the power he possesses.”

* * *

Jinwoo stood in front of the bathroom mirror after his shower.

Hmm...

He certainly looked pretty good. But he still couldn't believe someone as beautiful as Haein had feelings for him and would be willing to change guilds for him.

Am I that attractive?

Jinwoo smirked as he continued staring into the mirror. He wasn't in any danger of becoming a vain, narcissistic person, but he did have one thing he was immensely proud of. As a result of not missing a single daily quest, he had bulked up quite a bit, and whether it was due to the system, he was definitely taller than before.

But that just meant his body was the only thing he had going for him. His face was...well, apart from his steely gaze, he looked like the average guy on the street.

However...

Wait a minute.

Jinwoo's gaze turned serious as he peered at his reflection. He leaned forward to take a closer look. The Jinwoo in the mirror and the real Jinwoo stared at each other for a while.

Hmm?

He'd found something interesting. He examined every part of his face, and as he suspected, things had definitely changed. His scars, moles, and blemishes had never been very pronounced, but they were nonetheless completely gone.

Is this from the Spirit of Rehabilitation buff?

One of the buffs Jinwoo had received as a reward for becoming a player was that any damage to his body would be repaired. The buff was powerful enough to regenerate the leg that had been severed by the stone statue, so the buff could definitely have improved his complexion as well. The thing that caught his eye was...

...I'm pretty sure I look younger than before.

He was in his mid-twenties, but inspecting himself now, Jinwoo figured he could be easily mistaken for someone in his early twenties or so. How amazing. He'd heard that mana slowed down an awakened being's aging, so perhaps this was a similar effect?

Okay, that's enough...

It felt silly to be staring at himself in the mirror for this long, so he exited the bathroom.

Jinah happened to emerge from her bedroom at the same time, so the siblings entered the living room together.

Jinwoo grinned and called to her. "Hey."

“Mm?”

“What do you think about your big brother?”

“What about you?”

“Like, how attractive I am as a man.”

“Huh?” Jinah raised an eyebrow. “Where is all this unfounded confidence coming from? To me, you’re just the same old brother I’ve always had.”

“Well, gosh, thanks.”

Jinwoo pinched her cheek, and she retaliated with her usual kick in the shin. Of course, she only hurt herself in the process.

“Have you already forgotten who I am? How do you study with that brain of yours?”

“Excuse you.” Jinah pouted and glared at Jinwoo. “I was first place in the entire school on the last mock exam, I’ll have you know.”

Jinwoo was amused by her reaction but tried not to laugh. One of the wonderful things about family was they treated you the same no matter how much you changed.

Jinwoo dried his wet hair with a towel as he walked past his sister. “Keep up the good work.”

“You too.”

Jinwoo was about to go back to his room when he remembered something. “Oh yeah, I’m thinking of forming a guild.”

“Whoa!” Jinah’s eyes twinkled in excitement. “Are people gonna call you Mr. President now?”

“If everything goes well.”

“What’s the name of your guild?”

“I kind of wanted to ask you about that.”

“Ooooh, what is it, what is it?”

Seeing her filled with anticipation, Jinwoo cautiously asked, “What do you

think of SoloPlay Guild?”

“Huh?”

The contents of her response were the same as when they’d been joking around, but the tone was completely different. Gone was the playful teasing; her confusion was genuine this time.

“Why? Does it sound weird?”

“...Why would you name your guild that?”

“Because I like to work alone.”

“It definitely fits you, but it doesn’t really work with your guild.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you summon those soldiers in black armor?”

“Yeah.”

“So technically, you don’t fight alone.”

She had a point. Jinwoo nodded.

Even though, to me, it’s just one of my skills, other people don’t see it that way.

That made sense. This guild might be part of Jinwoo’s life forever, so he wanted a name that properly represented him. Hence, SoloPlay, but...

If it’s not resonating with others, then it doesn’t matter.

He needed something that represented him.

Jinwoo thought of something else. “How about Ahjin Guild?”

“Ahjin?” Jinah tried saying the name aloud and brightened. “It sounds like you just flipped my name, so I can get behind it. What does it mean?”

“It’s combining the Chinese characters for *myself* and *moving forward*.”

It was a name that made it clear this was something only he could do, and a name he’d like to attach to the guild he planned to move forward with.

“When you combine the characters together, it makes *Ahjin*, meaning *I move*

forward.”

“Ohhh.” Jinah gave him the best compliment she could give. “That’s not bad, I guess.”

* * *

The next day, Jinwoo went to the office to propose the new name. “So about the guild name...”

Jinho, who had been in the office all morning, smiled brightly. “I really like it, boss!”

Just as how a swan looks peaceful floating on the surface of a lake but its feet are desperately kicking like crazy underwater, so, too, was Jinho.

I’m fine with whatever as long as it’s not SoloPlay.

He had thought long and hard about it. But introducing himself as “Jinho Yoo, Vice President of the SoloPlay Guild” physically hurt him. Jinho didn’t know why, but he could actually feel pain on one side of his chest.

But how could he complain about a name his beloved boss had worked hard to come up with? So just as he’d resigned himself to his fate, along came a fleeting opportunity.

“Let’s go with that, boss!”

With his partner’s endorsement, the name was settled.

“That’s taken care of.”

In his mind, Jinho was screaming for joy.

Jinwoo rubbed his chin in thought. “So all that’s left is finding the last founding member.”

“Oh, about that...”

“Yeah?”

“What happened with Hunter Cha yesterday?”

“Hunter Cha won’t be joining us. She’s not what I’m looking for.”

Hngh?

Jinho swallowed his gasp. He knew Jinwoo had high standards, but he couldn't understand how he wasn't satisfied with a hunter like Haein. She was an S rank, young, and her abilities were amazing, bar none. On top of that, she was gorgeous. No matter how he looked at it, he couldn't figure out why she hadn't made the cut.

That was, of course, by looking at it from an ordinary person's perspective. Jinwoo was anything but ordinary.

He took down an S-rank magic beast almost entirely by himself on his first official raid after being reevaluated.

It made sense that Jinwoo wouldn't settle for just a mid-tier S-rank hunter. But then, what kind of hunter would meet his standards? Several hundred had applied to their guild after seeing Jinwoo's name in the description, but Jinho had a feeling none of them would do.

I don't think we'll ever find a better candidate than Hunter Cha...

Jinho was concerned that they'd never set up shop at this rate, so he carefully asked, "Um, boss? What kind of person are you looking for?"

"Someone with a hunter's license but no interest in the guild's activities. And someone we can trust."

"Huh...?" Jinho knew the perfect fit.

That sounds like—

But at that moment...

Knock, knock.

Someone was at the office door.

"Who is it?" Jinho opened it to reveal two unfamiliar men standing there awkwardly.

It was Jongsu and Yoontae, the guild master and vice master of the Knights Guild respectively. They had come to Seoul on a whim to meet with Jinwoo.

Jongsu smiled brightly upon recognizing the S-rank hunter. "Oh! You're here."

Jinwoo stood up. "And you are?"

“Apologies, I haven’t even introduced myself.” Jongsu strode over to Jinwoo and politely stretched out his hand. “I’m Jongsu Park, the guild master of the Knights.”

Jinwoo nodded. No wonder Jongsu seemed familiar. Even people who weren’t that interested in the world of hunters would recognize the masters of the top-five guilds. They were on TV often enough.

But the Knights Guild was located in Busan, on the opposite side of South Korea.

Jinwoo looked quizzically at them. “What brings you here?”

“So the thing is...” Jongsu hesitated and exchanged glances with Yoontae before speaking with much difficulty.

“We have to take care of this pretty big A-rank gate, and...” He steeled himself and got to the point. “May we have a minute of your time? I swear you won’t regret it.”

* * *

[The appearance of a huge gate at Gwangalli Beach has caused a panic among civilians...]

[Hunter’s Association deliberating whom to give permit to.]

[The Knights Guild surrenders the Gwangalli Beach raid permit?]

[Is this a repeat of the Jeju Island nightmare?]

Jongsu clicked one of the many news videos and played it for Jinwoo.

“Over there, look. Are you filming this?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Whoa, is that for real? How can a gate be so big?”

The video had presumably been taken by regular people whose voices were filled with fear, and understandably so, considering the enormity of the gate. It was taller than a ten-story building. While civilians had gotten used to gates appearing without warning anytime, anywhere, this one was still big enough to actually frighten people.

“There’s really no correlation between the size of a gate and its rank,” Jongsu explained once the video had ended. “But we’ve confirmed that the incredible amount of mana coming from this particular gate matches its size.”

The news piqued Jinwoo’s interest. “Is it an S-rank gate?”

“We were told it wasn’t impossible to rank this one, but it still came in just below the limit. This seems to be the biggest gate to ever appear in Busan.”

That meant the gate was as close to S rank as an A-rank gate could get.

So it should yield a good amount of experience points, shouldn’t it?

Unlike Jinwoo, whose heart was beginning to soar, Jongsu sounded glum. “Like you’ve seen, the association doesn’t want to give us the permit.”

“Because it’s too dangerous?”

“As you know, we have no S-rank hunters in our guild. The association just doesn’t trust us to handle the gate.” Jongsu paused to look at Jinwoo. “If you’re still looking for a guild to join—”

Jinwoo interrupted him by gesturing to the file sitting on the meeting room table. The words printed on the cover caught Jongsu’s eye.

List of Applicants for the Guild’s Founding Members Jongsu rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. “Oh, um...”

Jongsu’s plan to recruit Jinwoo for the Knights Guild had gone up in flames, so it was time to discuss the real topic at hand.

“The elite hunters of the Knights Guild rival those in the Hunters Guild. The only difference is we don’t have an S rank who can lead them.”

The Knights had done well until now, but no one knew what could happen in this raid. In the event that something unexpected might occur, they needed a high-rank hunter in their party.

The presence of an S rank could turn a situation around. The man sitting in front of him, Jinwoo himself, was a prime example of this. His sudden appearance had changed the fate of the Korean team when they were facing death.

Seeing Jinwoo in person, he seemed like thoroughly reliable even in the eyes of a fellow hunter.

Would he...give me an autograph if I asked for one?

Jongsu understood why Yerim had suggested they ask Jinwoo for an autograph even if he rejected their proposal.

“Is there something on my face?”

“No, nothing.” Jongsu laughed and waved it off. “If you join our strike squad this one time, Hunter Sung, we can do this raid.”

Jinwoo crossed his arms and leaned back. Before Jinwoo could mull it over, Jongsu hurriedly added, “Of course, we would give you proper compensation.”

He produced the contract he had brought with him. “We’ll give you twenty percent of the profits.”

A large guild offering an individual 20 percent of their profits from a dungeon was an excellent offer most couldn’t even begin to dream of. When a large guild raided a dungeon, an S-rank hunter would usually receive around 10 percent, but the Knights Guild was offering Jinwoo double that. It was certainly a lucrative offer.

However, Jinwoo had a different idea. “Fifty-fifty.”

Jongsu was in the midst of taking out a pen. His hand quivered. “Pardon me?”

“If you treat me as a guild and not a person, I’ll cooperate.” Jinwoo spoke firmly.

Jongsu agonized over the counterproposal.

Guh...!

However, Jongsu couldn’t play hardball like Jinwoo. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that the fate of the Knights Guild depended on this raid.

Jinwoo tutted to himself—*20 percent isn’t it.*

It wasn’t that Jinwoo was attempting to take advantage of the Knights Guild’s desperate situation. He was merely offering the most equitable split after taking everything into consideration, and that was fifty-fifty.

Not even the elite members of the Knights can hold a candle to my shadow soldiers.

They were no match for Jinwoo's soldiers either in quantity or quality. And that was before adding Jinwoo into the equation, meaning 20 percent would basically be working for free. This would be a fair and beneficial deal for both parties. Why would Jinwoo agree to anything less and undervalue himself?

"How about forty to six—"

"This isn't a negotiation."

"So you won't accept anything other than a fifty-fifty split?"

Jinwoo nodded in response.

Ngh...

Jongsu was lost in thought.

I figured this guy would be easy to deal with, since he's young and seems nice enough, but...

He understood where Jinwoo was coming from, though. Jinwoo could single-handedly beat all the other S-rank hunters. That was the kind of person they were trying to recruit, so what Jinwoo was suggesting wasn't unreasonable.

No...

Jongsu shook his head. It definitely wasn't unreasonable. Had Jinwoo been spiteful, he could've asked for 80 percent. Besides, Jongsu needed this deal to go through more than Jinwoo did. It would be an unimaginably huge loss for the Knights Guild to give up on this raid. On the other hand, what would Jinwoo lose? Absolutely nothing.

Jongsu felt as if he had been forcibly seated at the bargaining table by gunpoint. Considering the whole situation, wasn't Jinwoo being a gentleman by asking for only half?

But that wasn't all. If this deal went through, the Knights Guild would have secured the most reliable insurance they could get. Yoontae's words from yesterday popped into his mind.

“Boss, we’ll be done for if it turns out to be a red gate.”

But if Jinwoo accompanied them? He hadn’t faltered once as he dealt with several thousand S-rank magic beasts. Jongsu had watched with his own eyes what happened to the ants on Jeju Island.

He did all of that, didn’t he?

The reality of who exactly was sitting in front of him suddenly sank in.

Gulp.

He swallowed hard. After what he had witnessed with the ants, how could Jongsu even think about offering a mere 20 percent?

The rude one was me all along.

Jongsu readily admitted his mistake. In his mind, he was now thankful for Jinwoo’s generous offer. But his gratitude could go only so far. Since Jongsu had to surrender something, it was only fair to request something from Jinwoo in return, but what?

After a long deliberation, Jongsu cautiously opened his mouth.

“We will accept these terms, but in return...”

“In return?”

“Can we leave the magic-beast boss to you?”

Jongsu’s face was serious as he resolved to get this one concession from Jinwoo, no matter what. Since the boss tended to cause most of the damage in a dungeon, Jongsu was willing to raise the stakes by asking Jinwoo for the sake of minimizing the danger to the strike squad.

Seeing what he did in the ant cave, he shouldn’t have a problem dealing with the boss alone.

Jongsu pressed his lips tightly together as he nervously anticipated Jinwoo’s response. As the silence wore on, his worry about being rejected grew, and his face hardened.

On the other hand...

Snort.

As he fought to keep the corners of his mouth down, Jinwoo raised his hand from his chin to cover the smile threatening to escape and quickly furrowed his brow. He wanted it to seem like he was deep in thought over Jongsu's request.

His ruse worked. Wringing his hands anxiously, Jongsu lost all sense of time as he anxiously waited. Finally, Jinwoo let out a sigh like he had no choice.

"All right, then." He waited a beat before continuing. "I'll do it."

Jongsu pumped both his fists under the table.

We did it!

He felt as if all his worries and concerns had washed away. Why had he dragged this matter out for so long? He should've opened with this. Ever since they left Busan, Jongsu had been tense, but he now wore a big smile on his face.

All that was left to do was contact the association about the raid permit. With Jinwoo joining the strike squad, there shouldn't be any obstacles.

"The gate was discovered a while ago, so we should get the raid started tomorrow."

"I'll see you then."

"Oh." Jongsu paused from packing up his items. "Why don't you ride down with us in our car?"

He figured it would be more efficient to go together rather than make arrangements for travel, schedule a meeting place and time, and all that.

"We can put you up at the most luxurious hotel in the area."

But Jinwoo didn't need to suffer through a long car ride. He merely had to place one of his soldiers in Jongsu's shadow. That way, he'd never get lost or be late. Jinwoo snuck a peek at the circular shadow making its way across the floor as he offered up an excuse.

"I have an errand to run this evening, unfortunately."

"I see."

"I'll be there on time."

Barring the guild master himself being late, of course.

At that moment...Yoontae, who was coming back from the restroom, let out a yelp. "B-boss!"

Startled, Jongsu sprang to his feet. "What? What is it?"

"That shadow just moved! From that side to that side."

Jongsu paused, then glared at his vice master. "Yoontae...have you been drinking?"

"....."

Yoontae was at a loss for words at the cold reception and sheepishly scratched his nose.

"I asked if you've been drinking."

"I only had a couple cans of beer at the rest stop, boss."

"Didn't I tell you to be careful when we're on official business?"

"I'm sorry, boss." Yoontae bowed apologetically to Jongsu and Jinwoo. "My apologies, Hunter Sung."

Jongsu bowed to Jinwoo as well as he kept Yoontae's head pushed down. "Please allow me to apologize for the disruption. Yoontae is a good guy but sometimes talks nonsense when he drinks."

"No, it's okay. Shadows can move around sometimes, I'm sure."

As they were about to conclude the meeting on a good note, Jinwoo's cell phone began to vibrate on the table.

Vrrr, vrrr, vrrr.

Who is this?

He checked the caller ID, but it was a number he had never seen before.

"Excuse me. I need to answer this."

"Please go ahead."

The nervous Jongsu and noisy Yoontae simultaneously breathed out sighs of relief as Jinwoo politely excused himself from the room.

Yoontae muttered, "I'm telling you, that shadow was really moving..."

"Drop it!" Jongsu's glare shut him up.

After a brief silence, Yoontae's curiosity got the best of him. "So how did it go?"

"How do you think? Of course he decided to join the raid."

"That's great!" Yoontae's expression went from anxious to excited. Smiling, he inquired, "By the way, did you ask him about joining our guild?"

"Forget it. He said he was making his own and showed me this..."

Jongsu picked up the file of applicants like Jinwoo had.

Yoontae chuckled. "With all the guilds already established, how much can this guild be expected to grow? If he joined us, he'd be treated like a king. He's going through a lot of trouble for nothing."

"I agree." As Jongsu pursed his lips in disappointment and moved to put the file back, an application fell out. He winced and quickly picked it up but then froze.

"Huh?"

The picture of a woman attached to the application was one he knew well.

"Oh!" Yoontae was stunned as well. "Boss, isn't that...?"

He still couldn't believe what he was seeing, but Jongsu nodded in confirmation.

"Yeah, it's the vice president of the Hunters Guild."

Yoontae quietly stared at Haein's picture before glancing at the other man. "Boss, maybe we should let them acquire us."

Jongsu immediately scowled. "Oh, shut up..."

* * *

Outside the office, Jinwoo answered the call, and a familiar female voice came from the other end.

"Hello, dear."

Upon hearing the voice, Jinwoo felt relieved and strangely disappointed at the same time.

“Did you buy a cell phone, Mom?”

“Yes. I called you because I had a sudden desire to hear my son’s voice as soon as I bought it. Are you busy? I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

Jinwoo glanced back at the two waiting men from the Knights Guild and smirked. “Not at all.”

“That’s a relief. But I’m not sure if this was a good idea. I still can’t get used to this kind of thing.”

“Did you go to the store on your own? You didn’t take Jinah with you?”

“Why bother her when she’s busy with her studies?”

It’d be nice if his mother thought less about her kids and more about herself sometimes.

He sighed to himself as he ended the call. So...why was he so disappointed that it was his mother calling?

Who was I expecting it to be?

Jinwoo smiled as he put his phone in his pocket and then looked up.

The twinkle in his eye was back. Thanks to the men from the Knights Guild, he’d be able to breathe in the air of a dungeon once more.

An A-rank gate that’s closer to an S rank, they said.

It felt like forever since his last proper workout. Had it only been a week since he got back from Jeju Island? He’d cleared one B-rank red gate since then, which had been nothing special and had taken very little effort.

Ba-dump, ba-dump!

Jinwoo hadn’t felt his heart racing like this in a while and found himself looking forward to tomorrow’s raid.

* * *

All the elite hunters of the Knights Guild were gathered at the meeting place. They were excitedly anticipating the raid, and for good reason.

This was a gate that could jeopardize their lives, and if it turned out to be a red gate, they wouldn't have an escape route. But everything would be okay, because Jinwoo Sung would be joining them on this raid.

"Yes!" Yerim had let out a scream of joy as soon as she heard the news. The other hunters had also expressed their delight in their own ways at the deployment of this ultimate safety net.

Only one person was anxious here—Jongsu, the guild master, who nervously awaited him.

Damn it, I should've just made him come with us yesterday.

Jongsu checked his watch. It was five minutes to eleven. The raid was supposed to begin in five minutes. Jinwoo had said he'd be there on time, but Jongsu could see neither hide nor hair of him. His stomach began to churn.

They couldn't even begin without Jinwoo. The association had immediately handed over the permit when they were informed of Jinwoo's participation. Such was the influence of the S-rank hunter's name. So to go in without him?

More importantly...

Jongsu looked at the faces of the strike squad, their eyes bright and eager. The strike squad themselves could end up boycotting the raid even before the association could cancel it if Jinwoo didn't show.

Three minutes left.

Jongsu anxiously fished out his cell phone but forced himself to be patient and put it in his pocket. Surely it was rude to call someone who'd already contacted him ten minutes earlier and said he'd be there soon.

But Jongsu couldn't sense a powerful presence in the area. The guild master searched for something to calm his nerves and ended up with a cigarette in his mouth.

Where in the world are you, Hunter Suuung...?!

Meanwhile...Jinwoo exited his apartment building. He wore comfortable clothes and sneakers. When he checked the time, it was one minute to eleven.

As he looked up, he saw gray clouds gathering. Had Jinah taken an umbrella

with her? But that thought was fleeting.

I should get going.

Jinwoo pulled up his hood and smiled. First, he activated Stealth, and then...

Shadow Exchange.

...he swapped places with his shadow soldier.

* * *

At Jinah's high school, three male students were annoyed at having to run an errand for their art teacher.

"Isn't this forced labor?"

"Yeah."

"Why are we doing his job for him?"

Despite their complaints, they arrived at the second art classroom, which was currently being used for storage, and unlocked the door.

"Oof, the dust."

"Ugh."

Since the room had been unused for quite some time, they were met by a big cloud of dust. Worn art supplies, abandoned drawings, and model statues used for sketching were scattered throughout.

"How many statues did he ask for again?"

"I'm guessing six, since there are six groups."

"Come on... Even if we each carry one, we'll still have to make two trips."

"I mean, unless you can carry four at once..."

They rolled up their sleeves, but when one of them moved to grab a statue in the far corner, something caught his eye.

"Huh?"

The others also came closer at his strange tone.

"Hey, that's...?"

There on the wall was a large black hole. It was a gate about the size of a person.

The biggest of the three students inspected the gate and laughed. "It's no big deal."

He placed his hand on its surface. "It's a closed gate, so it's perfectly safe. No one can go in except hunters, and nothing can come out."

Yet, at that moment...

Krik!

A crack appeared on the surface of the gate, and a hand shot out to grab the student's head.

"Huh?"

He struggled, but the hand wouldn't budge at all. And then...

Crunch!

There was a sound similar to a nut being cracked, and blood sprayed everywhere.

"G-gaaaaaah!"

"Joonsuk!"

When the two other students screamed as they were splattered with blood... the black surface of the gate shattered like glass, and magic beasts started pouring out into their world.

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink